Landas 18:1 (2004) 149-169

THE FLAWED PASSION FILM OF MEL GIBSON: PROBLEMATICAL ESTHETIC, A PROBLEMATIC CHRISTOLOGY

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The art of cinema has been producing its own interpretations of the story of Jesus since its beginnings. Already in 1897, the year after the invention of cinema, the first filmic "Passion Plays"—collections of largely static *via crucis* tableaux lasting only a few minutes—were being produced and avidly screened by enthusiastic patrons of the "moving pictures." Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* brings this 106 year tradition full circle: like those early films, and like the tradition Catholic "Stations of the Cross" and the "Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary," Gibson's film limits itself to the final twelve hours of Jesus' life, beginning with the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane and ending with Jesus' death on the cross. The film also includes several brief flashbacks to events in Jesus' public life and a brief reference to the Resurrection.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE JESUS-FILM TRADITION

Since 1997 and the early "Passions," the Jesus-film tradition has ranged widely, with some of its most popular and important films providing interesting evidence of a variety of approaches, both in style and in content. Then Hollywood made its mark with a series of spectacular Jesus-epics: DeMille's *The King of Kings* in 1927, Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* in 1961 and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in 1965. Later Broadway and the musical drama inspired two Jesus-films, both of them coming out in 1973: Norman Jewison's rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, developed out of the single million-seller song by the same name, and David Greene's much more serious folk musical *Godspell*, based on a Master's thesis in theology. The next mutation of the tradition is in the mode of the psychological thriller, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was released to a firestorm of protests in 1988. In the 1970's two Italian Jesus-films were produced, which have had a lasting impact on the tradition: in 1976, Rossellini's *The Messiah*, with its cool, low-key production values and its extensive dialogues, proposed what has been termed the didactic approach, and in 1977, Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, with its great beauty and good taste, announced the esthetic approach and has since remained a milestone to be reckoned with by anyone hoping to make a Jesus-film.

In recent years, and catering much to popular taste and the television-modulated sensibility, three Jesus films have been produced: *Jesus*, made in Italy by Catholics as part of a series of biblical films,[1] and *The Book of Matthew* in 2002 and *The Gospel of John* in 2003, produced in the United States by Protestant Evangelical groups, and approaching the Gospel narratives very literally. All three find their commercial outlet mostly in the video market. There is no doubt that the high point of the Jesus-film tradition is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel according to Matthew*, released in 1964, and garnering much critical acclaim over the years; rather significantly, it is the only "life

of Christ" included in the Vatican's list of greatest religious films issued in 1997.

Given the awesome power of cinema to reach and touch the lives of millions of people, it is not easy for a Christian, with the minimum missionary spirit, to argue against a representation of Jesus in that medium: any honest attempt to artistically represent the life of Jesus is, in theory, laudable. That said however, we must recognize that all the Jesus-films, given the background and the esthetic choices of their directors, provide the viewer and the critic with thorny issues and problems; many of them, in fact, become object lessons what to avoid when making a Jesus-film. For example, the earliest "Passions," precisely because they are silent and brief, favor exaggerated gestuality in their actors and unnuanced caricature in their characters, dividing them neatly into good guys and bad guys, and the bad guys, of course, are Jews, most often portrayed as ugly, avaricious, blood-thirsty, thoroughly evil men. This simplistic and very problematical technique leaps to one's attention when viewing, for example, the brief Jesus episodes in Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916): the disciples of Jesus are unabashedly good and the hand-wringing, constantly-conspiring, visually-unpleasant Jewish religious authorities are "to a man" unabashedly evil.

The Hollywood-epic tradition raises a number of issues, among them the "creative enhancement" or "fictionalizing" of the Gospel text with unhistorical and unbiblical characters and episodes, often elaborated at great length and disconnected from the central Jesus story and often detracting from it. For example, the soft-porn scenes of the totally unlikely Mary Magdalene-Judas liaison which opens DeMille's *The King of Kings*—including an orgy at Magdalene's lavish palace, and Mary riding (Ben-Hur-like) off in a Roman chariot pulled by four zebras—sets a disastrously wrong tone for the story of Jesus which follow. Later, in *King of Kings*, Ray creates a fictional character, the sympathetic centurion Lucius, who, from the birth of Jesus till his death, has contacts with all the major characters in the

piece; in effect, and strangely, it is Lucius and not Jesus who holds together the narrative.

Clearly, artists have the right to base a film on their own even-highly personal vision of Jesus and of the Christ-event. But Jesus-films which fictionalize the biblical text or spirit present a particular problem. It is a well-documented fact that typical filmgoers perceive what they see on the screen—an image whose power is heightened, much magnified by the wide-screen Technicolor treatment, a variety of hyper-realistic photographic effects and a super THX sound system—as reality. And if it is an even vaguely biblical film, then what is on the screen is experienced as the biblical reality. And so, when a Jesus-film—perhaps full of non-historical, non-biblical material, and perhaps proposing a Christology and a Soteriology so distant from the commonly-held and proposed belief of the Church today as to be borderline heretical—presents itself, or is praised by others, as "truly Catholic in its vision," as "the authentic story of the Bible," the Catholic critic has the right and the duty to point out the film's errors, weaknesses and limitations.

Another problematical dimension of the Jesus-film has to do with the actors chosen to play the biblical characters. In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, for example, the contrast between the solemn, lugubrious Max von Sydow (as Jesus), a classical actor whose previous roles had been mainly as angst-ridden antiheroes in the films of Ingmar Bergman, and the many Hollywood stars in cameo appearances, including Charlton Heston, Shelley Winters, Sidney Poitier, Angela Lansbury, Pat Boone, raises the issue of the identity of popular actors interfering with the identity of the characters they portray—the filmmaker Robert Bresson refers to them as dark "filters"—and so with the communication of the Gospel message. Another fatal limitation of *The Greatest Story*, is Ray's choice to so obscure the Jewishness of Jesus—for example, the Last Supper is not represented as a Jewish ritual meal—that in the end, not only is Jesus not Jewish, but his concrete humanity and historicity also disappear and, in effect

denying the Christian belief in the Incarnation, he becomes a strange sort of universal, abstract, and unreal Christ.

The two Jesus musicals introduce the problem of the credibility and effectiveness of a Jesus character who, along with his disciples, regularly breaks into song—in *Godspell* the device works, in *Superstar*, no—and then *Superstar*, with its representation of the Jesus-story in fragmented postmodern style, is a classic case of the limits of that approach and of the consequent loss of the Gospel proclamation. A more serious limitation of both films is that they waffle—*Superstar* fatally—in their representation of the Resurrection.

Jesus of Nazareth, while seamlessly crafted and breathtakingly beautiful, lacks the radical incisiveness that marks the gospels and that should characterize a representation of the Jesus-story. Scrupulously authentic in costumes, cultural ambience and *mise-en-scene*, the film becomes a series of visually-striking, Hallmark card tableaux, including a thoroughly sanitized crucifixion, a kind of Passion without the passion. Thus the radical quality of the Gospel fades away. Zeffirelli also falls into the trap of Nicholas Ray, creating a non-biblical character, Zerah, who so manipulates both the Roman and the Jewish authorities, that in the end it is he—non-historical character—who is most responsible for the death of Jesus. Zerah serves two purposes: he neatly deflects any accusation of anti-Semitism, and he creates a soap-opera-type subplot which holds audience interest through this very long film. The cool didacticism of Rossellini's *Messiah*—Jesus teaches and preaches here more than in any other film—leaves the viewer strangely uninvolved, and his much-abbreviated, unemotional representation of the Passion makes Jesus' death seem more the noble, stoical death of a hero, like Socrates perhaps, than the passionate act of sacrificial kenosis of the Incarnate God which effects the salvation of the world.

The popular evangelical approach too, evinces severe limits. The Catholic-produced *Jesus*, for example, illustrates well the peril of

diluting the Gospel text—Jesus engages in a water-fight with his disciples at the Samaritan well and he never gets around to talking with the woman—and so of the Christian message, so that the film might appeal to all. The producer's statement, "We wanted to be sure not to offend either Catholics or Protestants or Jews or Muslims," says it all; the film offends no one, but the salt of the Gospel has been replaced by sugar. Both *The Book of Matthew* and *The Gospel of John*, films which have not been distributed in commercial cinema circuits, evidence well the problems of the too literal, and ultimately bland, undramatic transfer of a prose biblical text, entire and verbatim, to the film genre with its very different stylistic canons and requirements. McLuhan says that "the medium is the message," and the film medium communicates its message differently from the print- and proclamation-media.

Until Gibson's *Passion*, Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* clearly has been the most controversial of the Jesus-films. When it came out, many people were scandalized because of a basic misunderstanding of the "last temptation" sequence, which they erroneously read as an objective representation of Jesus' sexual acting out. In fact, the far more serious issues of that film are its inconsistent and often bizarre technical choices: for example, a Muslim song invoking Allah during the Last Supper scene, and an anachronistic and unbelievably gory "Sacred Heart" scene, beyond anything in Gibson's *Passion.*

The film also errs badly in its heavily psychological analysis and in the skewed anthropology it applies to Jesus: he is a man suffering severe psychological conflicts, perhaps to the point of psychosis, who in fact never resolves those conflicts, and ultimately, it is thanks to his sidekick, Judas, that this Jesus goes to die on Calvary.[2] Finally, and in spite of Scorsese's repeated professions of Catholic faith to the press, and the hastily-produced printed disclaimer before the opening titles, *Last Temptation* fails to resolve adequately the dynamic mystery of the human/divine dimensions of Jesus' existence and to represent a valid Christian theology of salvation.

Gibson's *Passion* in Context

The latest of the Jesus-films, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* offers a very powerful emotional experience; at times it is painful to watch and painful to reflect on. Only nominally similar to the early "Passion" films, Gibson's work obviously goes way beyond them: its length, the complexity of its narrative and its contemporary style, all distance it from the early "Passions," as does the fact that it not only represents visually the traditional elements of the Passion of Jesus, but it interprets them, giving them a theological thrust. While the early films were silent with title frames every so often indicating the dialogue, Gibson has his characters speaking the ancient languages: Jesus and the other Jews speak Aramaic, and the Romans, Latin.

While avoiding most of the excesses of the Hollywood epics, Gibson's *Passion* does develop, at times annoyingly, some dimensions of the biblical narrative, usually moving them in the direction of the sentimental. He gives a much-expanded role to Pilate's wife and to her concern that her husband not condemn Jesus; it includes a most sympathetic meeting between her and Jesus' mother. In fact Gibson creates a dynamic relationship among Mary, Mary Magdalene[3] and Pilate's wife, and in a certain sense, his representation of Jesus' Passion is seen and modulated through their eyes. There are some very beautiful moments among the women, for example when Mary, seconded by Magdalene and Claudia and in keeping with Jewish religious ritual—respected still today after Jews are blown apart by suicide bombs—wipes up Jesus' blood from the pavement in the place of the scourging.[4] But ultimately, this clever device, functioning at times as relief from the horror of the torture of Jesus, leans too much on the sentimental.

The scourging scene itself, seemingly endless, its sadistic cruelty—the "R" rating of the film is well-deserved—magnified by far too many extreme close-ups of flowing blood and flayed flesh, by

a heavy musical accompaniment, that often echoes the largely synthesized soundtrack of Scorsese's film and the seven or eight terrible falls of Jesus during his ascent of Calvary, can hardly be justified as the necessary suffering of Jesus in expiation for the sins of humanity. They seem more like pseudo-biblical counterparts of the gory battle scenes in Mel Gibson's earlier directorial (and acting) effort, Braveheart (1995), all action but little moral-spiritual significance.

More than once, Gibson slips into the kitsch that characterizes the Hollywood Jesus-films. For example, in order to have Jesus-in-chains meet Judas one more time, Gibson has him beaten by the arresting soldiers, lose his balance and fall over a cliff, and in a weird imitation of the extreme sport of bungee-jumping, he has him remain suspended just a few feet from the ground, above Judas. Later, in order to punish the bad thief for cursing Jesus, Gibson has a huge raven land on his cross and, in what I sensed was a reference to Hitchcock's *The Birds*, peck out his eyes; the tasty moment is photographed in vivid close-up. Then, at one point towards the end of the crucifixion, Gibson has Mary of Nazareth approach her dying son and kiss his feet; she ends up with a blood-stained mouth, face and clothes. The effect is bizarre, somewhere between images of vampires in horror movies, and the terrible images of a bloodied and devastated Jacqueline Kennedy on 22 November 1963. Later, to suggest that the Roman soldier with the lance is "washed in the blood of the Lamb," Gibson, in a truly bizarre move, has the man fall to his knees and pray under a veritable shower of Jesus' sacred blood. Did no one tell the special effects people that at that point, after twelve hours of profuse bleeding, Jesus would have had very little sacred blood left, and it certainly would not have sprayed out of his side. The earthquake, that in the Gospel splits the veil of the Temple in two (Lk. 23: 45), in *The Passion* goes on endlessly and splits the entire Temple in two. One of the strangest effects in the film is the "tear of God," a drop of water that, via digital manipulation, falls hypersonically from the eye of God in heaven all the way to earth

and to Calvary, and unleashes the violent storm-earthquake that marks Jesus' death.

It would be an understatement to say that Gibson's *Passion* has nothing of the musical about it, but its representation of Herod as a nervous, mincing neurotic complete with a hastily-donned, off-centered wig, seems lifted directly from *Jesus Christ Superstar.* I was half expecting the Tetrarch to lead Jesus to his swimming pool and ask him to "turn the water into wine." If *Jesus of Nazareth* and *The Messiah* lack on the one hand, incisiveness, and on the other hand, emotional impact, Gibson's film makes up for both: nowhere does it seek to represent beauty for the sake of beauty, its theological point is crystal clear and its emotional impact on the viewer is powerfully undeniable.

Finally, while studiously avoiding the dominant and fatal psycho-sexual analysis of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Gibson, like Scorsese, subjects the viewer to an emotional roller-coaster ride. The two films share heavy production values—very energetic photography, with lightning fast zooms and pans, many subjective shots from the point of view of the swooning Jesus, special effects (in Gibson, limited largely to his several repulsive figures incarnating evil); aggressive editing and heavy music score—and an at-times-overpowering focus on physical and emotional violence. In Scorsese, there are some moments of visual and emotional relief, in Gibson's *Passion*, very few.

Pasolini's *Gospel* and Gibson's *Passion*

Pasolini's *Gospel According to Matthew* has been, and is still, the greatest of the Jesus-films. And, though radically different from it, Gibson's *Passion* curiously has several elements in common with *Gospel.* Pasolini made his film because of a profound personal religious experience he was graced with after reading Matthew's gospel during a retreat in Assisi; Gibson's faith commitment in the Catholic

tradition—made even clearer to me when I spoke with him after the screening of *Passion*—is undeniable. And both men produced their films with unflagging courage and spiritual energy.

The two films are strong, uncompromising documents in content and in style. The Christian messages they proclaim are clear, unambiguous; they confront their viewers, perhaps uncomfortably, with radical choices . . . as did the preaching of Jesus. And perhaps because of this, both films have been subjected to a firestorm of controversy. For months in 1963-64, during the production of Pasolini's *Gospel*, accusations and condemnations were published in the Italian media, by people who, of course, could have no idea what the finished film would be like. The gist of the negative comments, mostly from circles connected with the Christian Democratic Party, was that Pasolini—former member of the Italian Communist Party, atheist and declared homosexual—could not possibly make a valid film about Jesus, indeed such a film would necessarily be a dangerous perversion of the Gospel. The premiere of the film at the Venice Festival of 1964 was presided over by hundreds of armed *Carabinieri*; riots were expected. The film was also strongly criticized in the Vatican's *Osservatore Romano*; some thirty-three years later however, its greatness was recognized by the Vatican.

The Accusations of Anti-Semitism

Gibson's *Passion* has generated more comment and controversy—both before its release and after—than most of the other Jesus-films,[5] in fact a highly-charged, polemical atmosphere has developed around it. Accusations and counter-accusations have been published in the media almost daily, most of them concerning with what is suspected and feared to be the anti-Semitic stance of the film. Some are based on an early cut of the film, before major editing, but most are founded on pirated copies of a very early version of the film's script, hardly a good ground for judging the final film, because most final cuts—except perhaps for Hitchcock's films—differ

greatly from their original scripts. Theologians, pastors, and high Church authorities, have been enlisted by both sides in the hope of bolstering their positions. Even the ailing John Paul II has been unjustly and unfortunately pulled into the fray, with claims that he has seen and liked the film, and then disclaimers insisting that the Pope does not comment on films, preferring to leave that to experts.[6] Of course, even if the Pope has seen and liked the film, his evaluation of it, whether it be positive or negative—his purported comment "It is as it was" seems positive—hardly has the theological and binding authority of an *ex cathedra* proclamation. Further, doom-prophesying reviews have been written by people who have not seen the film, invoking the dark shadow of the Holocaust and claiming in alarm that the film "could unleash new pogroms against Jews," and fundamentally irrelevant and often inaccurate comments have been made about the director's personal life and faith, mainly to discredit the film.

The basic issue here is the way the film portrays the responsibility for the condemnation and execution of Jesus, and this has been a hot issue for all the Jesus films, one that their directors must necessarily come to terms with. Are the Romans to blame for Jesus' death? Or are the Jewish religious leaders responsible? Is it *all* the Jewish leaders, or only some of them? Or is the blame for Jesus death widened, implicating the Jewish people as a community or as a race?

The issue and these questions are very significant because the accusation of deicide made against the Jews since early Christian times has been the source and structure for the persecution of Jewish people by Christians for many centuries, and because the often grossly anti-Semitic dramatic Passion Plays of Europe, from the Middle Ages till recent times, are considered by many as one of the crucial religious elements in the background of the Nazi Holocaust in the Twentieth Century. This terrible accusation is most often based on a verse in Matthew's gospel, "His blood be on us and on our children," (Mt. 27: 26), epithet shouted unanimously—the text specifies: "to a man"—

by the crowd of angry Jews in the courtyard of the palace of Pilate; the phrase, in effect, calls down a divine curse on those Jews and on all Jews of all times, and has been evoked many times as a justification for organized acts of violence against Jews, perpetrated, most often, by Christians.

Since Vatican II, the position of the Church has become ever more clear regarding anti-Semitism, condemning it in whatever form it may appear. John Paul II has visited the Rome synagogue, where he referred to the Jews as "our much beloved brothers and sisters, our older brothers and sisters,"[7] he has prayed at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and has publicly implored God's forgiveness for the many acts of hatred and violence of Catholics against Jews. In 1988, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, drawing their inspiration from the Vatican document, "*Nostra Aetate*," published a document that very clearly sets the guidelines for the representation of the Passion of Jesus by Catholics, "including, but not limited to dramatic, staged presentations of Jesus' death most popularly known as 'passion plays.'"[8] Until very recently, Passion plays have been notorious for their violently anti-Semitic representations of the Jews, always using the offending verse from Matthew.

Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* assumes a rather balanced position in regard to the critical issue of the representation of the blame for the death of Jesus. On the one hand, the individual Caiaphas and some of his colleagues on the Council that pushes the Romans to condemn Jesus may be slightly stereotyped and their power over a weak and perhaps too good Pilate exaggerated; the Bishops' "Guidelines" warn against "caricaturing the Jewish people."[9] But then, conforming to the "Guidelines," Gibson balances well the position of Caiaphas and company by showing several aggressively dissenting members of the Council—Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and other Jews supportive of Jesus—who strongly condemn the inquest against Jesus as a "travesty. . . a beastly travesty," and angrily storm out of the assembly.

In the crowd scenes during the "trials" of Jesus, regrettably, the film has too many people gathered in the courtyards, an exaggeration the "Guidelines" warn against, saying that the likely historical reality of "the small 'crowd' at the Governor's palace" should never be replaced by a "teeming mob."[10] But, then, as if to counter this lapse, and very significantly, Gibson does not include the usually offending words of the crowd, "His blood be on us and on our children."(Mt 27: 26) Furthermore, not everyone in the large crowd is against Jesus, dissenting voices are heard, and these scenes are then strongly contrasted a few moments later when Gibson shows large crowds of people crying out in favor of Jesus as he struggles to ascend Calvary. Their protests in word and action are so strong that the Roman soldiers have trouble controlling them. Then, as Simon of Cyrene, compelled into service by the soldiers, begins to help Jesus carry his cross, one of the Roman soldiers sneeringly refers to him as "You Jew!" The anti-Semitism here is the Roman's, and the film clearly condemns him. The pro-Semitism of this Simon-Jesus episode is quite eloquent: Simon, at first reluctant, afraid, to help Jesus, once he is on contact with him, supports not only the cross but also, literally, Jesus, repeatedly whispering loving words of support to him: "We're almost there. . . it's almost done. . . ." Gibson's shot of the two of them from behind, their arms intertwined as they stagger up the hill, is quite moving.

Finally, the most clear evidence of the film's not intending to assume an anti-Semitic stance is its striking penultimate scene, a physically static but morally dynamic representation of the *Pietà*, in which a grieving Mary, flanked by Mary Magdalene, John and the converted Roman soldier, stares *not* at the dead Jesus in her arms, the more logical gesture, but rather into the camera and so, directly at the viewer, the only time in the film that Gibson breaks the dramatic frame, and so the dramatic "illusion" of the narrative, and addresses the viewers directly. This singular shot, lasting a long twenty seconds, compellingly invites the viewers "to enter" the narrative and assume our responsibility, as sinners, for the death of this Jesus, who—the film repeatedly makes clear—has died for our sins. Whether or not

one agrees with him, Gibson here is saying, more strongly than any other Jesus-film director, that it is not the Jewish people who have killed Jesus; every one of us sinful human beings is responsible for his death.

The gospel according to Mel

If Pasolini's *Gospel* and Gibson's *Passion* have some elements in common, in fact the differences between the two films far outweigh these. The most obvious difference is that Gibson's is a Passion play, while Pasolini's covers (quite literally) almost all of Matthew's gospel. Pasolini limits the dialogue of his film exclusively to the words of Matthew, while Gibson, justifiably, develops it widely. While both films have English subtitles, Pasolini has his characters speak in Italian, and Gibson's communicate in Aramaic and Latin. Unique in the tradition of the Jesus-film, this audacious and courageous move on the director's part is wonderfully effective.[11]

In the final analysis, Gibson's film is a highly personal interpretation of the Jesus story, something the director admits to quite candidly. It is very much "the gospel according Mel." In its content, it reflects elements from the gospels, from other non-canonical books[12] and from the director's own devotional interest; in its style, it reflects many elements from mainline Hollywood cinema—a genre Gibson knows well—and most obviously from Gibson's earlier film, *Braveheart* (1995), whose tagline— "All men die. Not all men really live."—is oddly similar to the tagline on some of the posters for *The Passion of the Christ*: "Dying was his reason for living."

In contrast to Pasolini's film in ascetic black and white, with its straightforward linear editing, which respects the ellipses in Matthew's gospel, *Passion* is in vivid color and operates a series of time- and space-twisting techniques—flashbacks and parallel-editing—to modulate and analyze the events of its narrative. Personally I found Gibson's exaggerated use of slow-motion

photography, and his digitally-generated monsters/incarnations of evil, annoying, a concession to mainline Hollywood cinema and in the end, quite ineffectual. On the other hand, particularly effective and theologically astute are Gibson's subjective flashbacks to the words and gestures of institution at the Last Supper as Jesus is being crucified: Jesus is living in his flesh the sublime reality that he created sacramentally in the Last Supper and what Christians commemorate efficaciously in the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist. While Pasolini inserts a few brief excerpts of classical music contrapuntally, Gibson enhances most of his film with a dense, at times too heavy music score created for it; Pasolini favors very basic and unobtrusive camera angles and movements, Gibson, as we have already said, elaborates a wide variety of self-conscious and often dizzying photographic techniques, including some shocking digital special effects, all staples of the contemporary Hollywood action drama.

Several of Gibson's innovations in the traditional content of the Jesus-film, while extra-biblical, are very beautiful and effective. When Mary enters the courtyard over the chamber in which the arrested Jesus is being held and tortured, Gibson has her lie on the ground and press her cheek to the stones; she wants to be close to her son, and Jesus, below, senses her presence, her love, and it strengthens him. On the way to Calvary, when Mary runs to help Jesus who has fallen for the nth time, Gibson inserts a flashback of her running to pick up the crying child Jesus who has fallen in their home; then in the present time, Jesus, bloodied and suffering, consoles his mother: "See mother ... I make all things new." The words are from Revelations (21: 5), but here they take on a theological-soteriological significance, showing Jesus as fully aware that he is effecting the salvation of the world. Gibson makes the same point beautifully in two other gestures of Jesus regarding his cross: at the beginning of the climb to Calvary, Jesus literally embraces his cross, a gesture which causes confusion among the Roman soldiers, and once on the summit of Calvary, Jesus, knocked to the ground by the blows of the soldiers, literally crawls onto his cross, a striking symbol of his freely choosing to die for the sins of humanity.

The Theological Positions of the Two Films

Each director announces his thematic program, and so, the theological position of his film in its title. Pasolini's *Gospel* proclaims the Good News of the life, the preaching and healing and the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the definitive event of salvation, the liberation of the People of God: though uncompromising in its demands, ultimately Pasolini's theology is a theology of joy and hope in the Risen Lord. In contrast, Gibson's *Passion* demonstrates primarily a theology of atonement, a theology of the cross. He focuses narrowly on the suffering and death of Jesus, largely disconnected from his preaching and healing ministry; on Jesus' free decision to take onto himself, like the scapegoat, like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the sins of humanity and to live this horrific ordeal to redeem sinners. Clearly to set up this focus, the film opens with a quotation from the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah, understood by Christians as images of Jesus' Passion: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Is. 53:5); every one of the many lashes of the whip during the later, extended scourging scenes would seem to represent one of these human transgressions. Gibson's flashbacks to the Last Supper, as we have already seen, while briefly attenuating the overpowering effect of the physical agony of Jesus, also modulate that suffering, act as a hermeneutic for that agony. As Jesus' cross is lifted up, a flashback shows him saying, "This is my body which is given up for you" over the bread; as the cross falls into place, a second flashback shows him saying "This is the cup of my blood ... shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins" over the wine. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb, the victim on the altar, whose body and blood—as in the Eucharistic Sacrifice—are offered in atonement for the sins of humanity.

The Most Crucial Scene of the Resurrection

The Resurrection scene is one of the most crucial of every Jesus-film; the content and style of its representation reveal much about the director's theological position and can confirm or deny the

theological thrust of the entire film. Pasolini creates a twenty second long shot of Jesus, standing on a hilltop, strongly and urgently proclaiming the concluding words of Matthew's gospel, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . . . I am with you always" (Mt. 28: 19, 20), while a group of disciples and other people run joyously towards him. On the soundtrack, an explosion of sacred music and song—the very powerful, energetic *Gloria* of the Congolese *Missa Luba*, with its pounding drums and joyful voices—underlines the significance of the Resurrection as a cosmic victory not only for Jesus but for the entire people of God, a victory with a clear communitarian and missionary thrust.

In high contrast to this, Gibson's Resurrection scene seems to have no implications for the people who have lived the Passion with him, for the nascent Christian community. Gibson places his camera in a dark space. We hear the tomb-sealing stone being rolled back and we realize that the camera is inside the tomb, which gradually is suffused by bright sunlight from outside. The camera lingers on the shroud of Jesus, which contains his body and then mysteriously collapses, a transparent reference to the Shroud of Turin. Then into the frame steps Jesus: we see him in profile in a head-and-shoulders shot, all the marks of his Passion gone from his face. One wonders if he still has the wounds in his hands and feet and side, but there is no doubting Thomas, or anyone else, to verify this fact. On the soundtrack, we hear the beating of drums, striking a military rhythm—the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ is certainly not a military victory—and as they grow stronger and stronger, Jesus slowly steps out of the frame. Fade to black.

Gibson represents the Resurrection event not as a cosmic victory for Jesus *and* for all women and men of all times, the pivotal event of human history, but rather as a private experience of Jesus—actually he seems more resuscitated than Risen—which does not touch either his disciples or the viewers of the film. There is no joy or hope in the scene; Mary, Mary Magdalene, John and the converted Roman soldier remain suffering and passive in the *Pietà* tableau, separated from the Resurrection by a screen that is held black for six

seconds, and by the self-centered and isolated Lord once again alive. From the beginning of the film, Gibson has shown us a Mary who has such a strong psycho-spiritual mother-son communion with Jesus that even at a distance, she feels his pain, and he feels her presence and love. Surely this mother-son communion, whose renewal is promised when Gibson has Jesus whisper to her with authority, promise and even joy, the words from Revelation, "See mother ... I make all things new," a communion so brutally broken off by his death, would, could, should have been manifestly renewed in the Resurrection. But Gibson, caught up in the extreme preoccupation with the sins of humanity that informs his atonement theology,[13] and much of the action of his film, misses a chance to give all of us sinners hope. Too bad!

Gibson's *Passion* and Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises

Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* is not easy to watch, not easy to take. I found the endless and extreme physical violence visited on Jesus very strong, magnified by the often violent style of the film, at times "over the edge" (Gibson's own words), at times exaggerated beyond what is necessary to represent Jesus' self-sacrifice for the redemption of us sinners. As a Jesuit, a sinner who is saved, my life is centered on Jesus the Christ experienced through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. In the Exercises, which we Jesuits do yearly, the "Third Week" is the experience of Jesus' Passion, contemplated in prayer for five hours each day, at times as vividly as anything in Gibson's film. But in my experience there is a crucial difference between Gibson's version and that of Ignatius. The Spiritual Exercises structure the prayer experience of the Passion between an experience of the ministry of Jesus, the "Second Week," in which the exercitant joyfully shares vocation and community with Jesus and becomes his disciple, and the Resurrection of Christ, the "Fourth Week," during which—again for five hours of contemplative prayer daily—the exercitant lives the joy and power and victory of the Risen Lord. That gives the exercitant hope!

In Gibson's film, a devotional meditation in the Franciscan mode on the Stations of the Cross—Francis' devotion to the crucifix is well-known, as is his being the first Christian to be gifted with the stigmata, the signs of Jesus' Passion—we experience the Passion from the outside, separated from the Good News of his preaching and healing ministry, and isolated from his Resurrection; we remain at the foot of the cross, passive and despairing with the other mourners. For John and the soldier, for the women, who, in the Gospel are the first witnesses of the Resurrection and for us—sinners who found their hope in the victory of the Risen Lord—Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* offers little hope.

NOTES

[1] For an in-depth treatment of this film, see my article, "Friendly and Fun-loving Are Not Enough: A Theological Critique of the Latest Jesus Film," in *Landas*, 16: 2 (2002): pp. 1-20.

[2] For a detailed treatment of this thorny issue, see the chapter on *The Last Temptation of Christ* in my book, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Franklin WI: Sheed and Ward, 2000), pp. 48-71. To the argument that this "skewed anthropology" is in fact something that Scorsese inherits from Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, I refer the reader to a book coming out in 2005—*Scandalizing Jesus?: Reappreciating Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation*, edited by Darren J. N. Middleton, and published by Trinity Press International-Continuum, New York—in which, in a chapter dedicated to the Kazantzakis/Scorsese "meeting over the *Last Tempation*," I point out in considerable detail how Scorsese repeatedly gives his own, extreme spin to material that in the novel is quite subdued. The bizarre Sacred Heart scene, for example, is original with Scorsese.

[3] Unfortunately, Gibson subscribes to the mistaken notion that Mary Magdalene and the prostitute saved from stoning by Jesus are one and the same person. In the Gospel there is no conclusive evidence that Mary of Magdala (mentioned in Mt. 27: 56, 61; 28: 1; Mk. 15:40, 47; 16: 1; Lk. 8: 2; 24: 10; and Jn. 19: 25; 20:1-18) is a sinner. From the Sixth Century onwards—when Pope Gregory the Great in a homily associated Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman in Luke's gospel (7: 36-50)—Mary Magdalene has been

assigned the role of the archetypal sinner. No less than Krzysztof Kieslowski, in his masterful film, *A Short Film about Loving/Decalogue Six*, repeats this error. Dan Brown in his bestseller, *The DaVinci Code*, corrects the error but then goes on to make his own regarding the Magdalene, suggesting her as Jesus' woman, a much less significant role that the one given her in John's gospel (20: 11-18), as the first witness of Jesus' Resurrection.

[4] I suspect that most non-Jewish viewers of the film will not understand the significance of this Jewish gesture of Mary. It would have been very easy for Gibson to include a hermeneutical line to explain it, for example, Claudia saying to Mary: "I know your religious tradition and I brought you some towels."

[5] The only film that has elicited more, and more violent, protests, is Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ.*

[6] The Pope's private secretary, Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz, is reported, by the Catholic News Service, to have denied the Pope's positive comment; on the other side of the issue, the Vatican Press Secretary, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, is reported (by Icon Productions, the film's producers) to have confirmed the Pope's laudatory judgement. For a detailed critical description of this ongoing controversy, see John L. Allen Jr, "Pope on Gibson Movie: Was it as it was?" in *National Catholic Reporter*, www.NCRonline.org, 30 January 2004.

[7] On 13 April 1986, the Pope made this nothing short of revolutionary step towards reconciliation with the Jewish community, the first of many he has made during his pontificate. Speaking in Italian, he used the word "prediletti," "much beloved," to qualify the "bothers and sisters." The reference is clearly biblical: "prediletto" is the very word God uses to proclaim Jesus his "beloved" Son at the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:5).

[8] The document, whose official title is *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*, can be found online at: www.bc.edu.research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/catholic/Passion_Plays.htm

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Two colleagues of mine in the University, Classics scholars specialized in the languages spoken in the Middle-East in biblical times, argue that while it is clear that Jesus and the disciples would have spoken Aramaic among themselves,

the Romans in Palestine, in fact used two languages: Latin for military matters and Greek for all matters of general civil administration. It is more likely, for example, that Jesus would have spoken Greek as a second language than Latin, and more likely that Pilate would have spoken to Jesus in Greek than in Latin. In the film, Pilate speaks Latin to Jesus and Jesus responds to him in that language. Gibson, who says he is striving for historical authenticity with the ancient languages, chooses to simplify things by eliminating Greek. One can only wonder if the exclusive choice of Latin was perhaps dictated by Gibson's much publicized personal devotion to the Latin Mass.

[11] It would appear that some extrabiblical elements in the narrative come from the diaries of Anne Catherine Emmerich, an Eighteenth Century Catholic seer and considered a saint by many, collected in a book entitled, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.* These include a cross, perhaps that of Jesus, that is being constructed in the Temple precincts; the physical violence against Jesus during the hearing before Caiaphas and Annas that is far beyond what the Gospels report; Pilate who angrily criticizes the High Priest for the abuse of Jesus: "Since when do you punish prisoners before you bring them to me?" Emmerich's diaries are notoriously and embarrassingly anti-Semitic.

[13] In fairness to Gibson, it is clear that personally he believes in the Resurrection. But in his film, in the emphasis he places on the atonement-sufferings and death of Jesus, and in Jesus' private Resurrection, he does not connect the Resurrection with the people of God. Theologically-speaking, it is the Resurrection that guarantees the victory of Jesus' act of atonement, for the people of God who need that atonement and who without the death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ, would not be saved. Gibson's *Passion* does not give the people of God that victory.