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Film Take

The Passion of the Film

**Cinematic Modes of Empathy
in the Service of Moral Action**

John S. Nelson

Poroi, 3, 2, December, 2004



There are many ways of putting Jesus at risk
and making us feel his suffering.¹

— David Denby

This is the most violent film I have ever seen.²

— Roger Ebert

- 1 Notwithstanding some astounding success for Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the cinematic phenomenon of 2004 remains *The Passion of the Christ*.³ Mel Gibson's reactionary take on the trial, torture, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus has generated acclaim and controversy worldwide.⁴ It is the anomalous blockbuster that resounds with religious as well as political implications. *Newsweek* has criticized it in detail over five different issues.⁵ The principal reviewer of films for the *New Yorker* has taken the rare step of condemning it with careful respect not once but twice.⁶ The film has made a mint for Gibson.⁷ It has challenged the Hollywood aversion to religion as a theme for films.⁸ And it has sparked again the smoldering discontent with graphic violence in popular movies.
- 2 The veteran reviewer for *Newsweek*, David Ansen, complains that "*The Passion* plays like the Gospel according to the Marquis de Sade."⁹ Roger Ebert reports that "*The Passion of the Christ* is 126 minutes long, and" he guesses "that at least 100 of those minutes, maybe more, are concerned specifically and graphically with the details of the torture and death of Jesus." He warns that "you must be prepared for whippings, flayings, beatings, the crunch of bones, the agony of screams, the cruelty of the sadistic centurions, the rivulets of blood that crisscross every inch of Jesus' body." This, thinks Ebert, "works powerfully for those who can endure it."¹⁰ As a local reviewer adds in the film's defense, "Gibson's premise is simple: the brutality is needed to remind mankind of

the nature of Christ's sacrifice. Under that principle, anything is fair game." Yet "even when he is manipulative," argues the reviewer, "Gibson pulls all the right strings on his audience."¹¹

- 3 Well, I wouldn't go that far. Already the backlash, nearly inevitable, has begun with the September release of the DVD.¹² Even from the first viewing, the film's music by John Debney has struck me as moving at some moments – but more often as heavy-handed and intrusive. At times, it becomes nearly as overbearing as the distracting score that composer Philip Glass (and director Stephen Daldry) inflicted on *The Hours* (2002). The Gibson reliance on Aramaic, Latin, and subtitles is more peculiar than persuasive or poetic.¹³ As cinema, the Gibson movie gains in some ways but loses in others from the sheer familiarity of its story. In places, such as the early action at the Garden of Gethsemane, the *mise-en-scène* is murky or unimaginative. ("At first," observes Denby, "the movie looks like a graveyard horror flick."¹⁴) To take issue with these or other features of the film can be more than to pick at nits.
- 4 On the whole, though, *The Passion of the Christ* may be welcomed as an intriguing effort to help humankind experience the significance of its own sin. It would short-circuit human insensibilities. It would awaken us to the suffering we inflict on others or even ourselves.
- 5 Christianity teaches that Jesus takes upon Himself the harrowing pain of human evils – high and low, large and small, relentless and literally excruciating. The Gibson film would help us feel this superhuman sacrifice, empathize with this terrible pain. It would do so in the service of moral action to minimize sin and mitigate suffering. Sense the awful harm of our sin, and sin less: that is the strategy evident in Gibson's film. For all the furor about feeding anti-Semitism and patriarchy that publicized the film so effectively, it bears better comparison to other recent movies that tap graphic violence to mobilize a personal sense of moral responsibility for our everyday conduct. By this take, *The Passion of the Christ* benefits from assessment alongside *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and especially *Se7en* (1996).

The Sensing of Sin

- 6 By genre, of course, *The Passion of the Christ* is a passion play. This is a medieval form, and its generic ambition is to help us sinners know the sacrifice of Jesus in dying for our sins.

Christianity emphasizes the human suffering of Jesus as a man, taking upon himself the evils of the world. Gibson's film seeks this personal knowledge of divine sacrifice through an individual experience of physical pain, hellish bodily torment. To help us humans sense this body in pain, it gives us skin torn to tatters; palms flattened and pierced by spikes; muscles twisted, slashed, and mangled; blood that runs and pools onto unyielding stones. It closes on the forehead ripped by the crown of thorns. It dwells on the face spewed with gobs of spit. It shows the chest pummeled and stung by jagged rocks. It turns insistently toward the back flayed then crushed and raked by the unbearable cross. It watches the legs bludgeoned and twitching, the feet scraped and deformed. The film has us see this nearly unbelievable brutality, not in glimpses, but in sustained shots of gore. It has us hear the related hate and torment in cascading of cries of abuse, agony, lament. Whatever the fidelity to history or Gospel, the Gibson film shows an unspeakable violation of dignity, morality, and mentality – yet most insistently of body.

- 7 The aspiration to empathy, in *feeling with or as others*, differs from sympathy as *feeling for others*. The Christian teaching is not merely that Jesus sympathizes with humans in their fallen state of sin and suffering. It is rather that Jesus is one with God *and* humanity. In dying, Jesus takes upon Himself our sins: to know us at our worst and to forgive us when we repent of evils. In those last hours, leading to and beyond the cross, Jesus feels our harm as His pain. The passion play celebrates this sacrifice as incomprehensible yet also, somehow, communicates it.
- 8 Across the absolute abyss between God and us as human, all too human, the passion play strives to make the sacrifice of Jesus – as the necessary suffering of each and every sin – not just memorable for us but tangible, tasteable, actionable. To do this, the Gibson film displays a body under fierce, unremitting assault. One way to think of this, explains David Denby, is that it calls on our continuing capacity to conflate cinema with reality:

A train chugs into a station, and the audience screams in terror and ducks under the seats. It is 1895, everyone's favorite moment in film history – the time of naïveté when the cinema was born. The audience that turned up for the Lumière brothers' pioneering exhibition, in Paris, was not yet comfortable with the idea of illusion. The image onscreen was not just a

picture of something real; it was reality itself. That idea hasn't quite faded: to some degree, many of us still believe that the cinema has a scandalously intimate connection with life. After all, movies are a photographic medium in which figures tread across the screen in what appears to be real time; the dominating impression that *this is real* is a large part of the primitive power of the art form. If the notion weren't still alive, the culturally advanced wouldn't be at such pains to assert the contrary – that the cinema is always some form of illusion, that “realism” is itself no more than a single style among many. One of the startling things about the response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is the way the movie burns through this kind of sophistication and reaffirms, for better and for worse, the primordial sway of the image: the people who love the movie, bound by belief, give themselves over to the ecstasy of the real. There it is onscreen: every blow, every step up to Golgotha, right there in front of us. It happened.¹⁵

“*The Passion*,” Denby thinks, “is junk, but at least it's not trivial, cynical junk in the usual style of postmodernist pop – the gleeful rooting around in the scrap heap of discarded illusion, Kill Bill-ism for nonbelievers. No, *The Passion* is medievalist junk, a literal, blood-and-bone rendering of agony and death, and, for the audience coming to it with the right emotional wiring, seeing is believing.”¹⁶

- 9 It is odd to treat the middle ages as signally literal-minded, but it is not odd to see the approach of *The Passion* as a bodily equivalent. The politics of bodily display are fully figural. As Robert Hariman shows, they incline toward the courtly and thus, we might say by extension, toward the medieval.¹⁷ In promising comprehensive corporal punishment, Marcellus Wallace, the gang boss played vividly by Ving Rhames in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), declares memorably that “I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass.” To violate the Christ's whole holy body – part by visible part, with every corporeal element given symbolical significance, taken apart and so defiled most definably for us – suits politically the Christian appreciation of Jesus as the King of Kings.
- 10 To suggest bodily lessons for each terrible step on this tortuous path is to court the same politics of medievalism pursued by *Se7en*. The name evokes the seven deadly sins at the dark heart of

medieval Christianity. The film may have been the single most influential movie of the 1990s when it comes to political aesthetics. Aspects of *Se7en*'s plot, with cryptically connected acts moving step by step to larger, possibly astonishing lessons, have been appropriated by films as various as *8 MM* (2000), *Fallen* (1998), *15 Minutes* (2001), *Pay It Forward* (2000), even *Unbreakable* (2000). Yet the features of *Se7en*'s look and sound have been imitated even more widely and effectively: scratchy frames of jumpy, flickering film in seeming deterioration from earlier technology somehow mismatched to current equipment; the graphic grunge of shut-ins consigned to stink and clutter their close places with various forms of animal, vegetable, mineral, and moral filth; the aural grunge of chants, by nine inch nails in the case of *Se7en*, replete with an electronic repertoire of sounds such as the scratching that slides needles over the grooves in phonograph records; especially the images of light overwhelmed by darkness, with dim beams from flashlights probing bleak houses or blacker closets. In this way, *The Passion*'s beginning murk in the Garden of Gethsemane echoes the nearly impenetrable gloom of *Se7en*'s opening. "At first," reports Denby, "the movie looks like a graveyard horror flick."¹⁸

- 11 In *Se7en*, these devices rev, twist, and adapt elements from earlier aesthetics of horror for latter-day sophistications of noir. Likewise they seek to update and aggravate medieval sensibilities of sin to fit them for atrocities mundane in our postmodern settings. The project in *Se7en*, as in *The Passion*, is to provoke in postmodern viewers something akin to a medieval recognition of mortal sin in everyday deeds. Unless we feel the violence in every fiber, how can we repent and resist it? In postmodern apathy, *Se7en* insists, we currently tolerate, even cultivate, practices for which medieval Christians knew we humans deserve to die – and suffer eternal damnation. The challenge is to help us jaded, worldly viewers sense how daily gluttony, greed, anger, and all the rest are now destroying our souls. *Se7en*'s strategy is to give us momentary glimpses of bodies, one appalling part after another, in startling extremes of distortion and torment. To make the sin as bodily and visibly violent as possible on the big screen is to venture postmodern recuperation of a medieval device. *Se7en* is high-concept horror with graphics to match. Returning in much the same spirit of gloomy rampage to its own medieval genre, *The Passion* is a similar pursuit.
- 12 For most viewers, *Se7en* manages surprise and suspense denied to *The Passion*. *Se7en* is a tale of more or less hardboiled detection.

Day by day, it relates the week-long investigation of ongoing murders. When the horrors start coming to light, William Somerset, played by Morgan Freeman, is seven days away from retirement from the homicide squad. He works with his heir-apparent. David Mills (Brad Pitt) is an experienced detective but new to the big city. He has brought his wife Tracy (Gweneth Paltrow) and their dogs to an apartment that turns out to be rattled intermittently by commuter trains. Everything and everybody gets shaken to the core.

- 13 The murders form a pattern that comes to encompass Somerset and especially Mills. The pattern is constructed by the perpetrator to provide a wake-up call to the inhabitants of the whole society, and it seems clear that the film intends the same for its viewers. Apathy is the antithesis of empathy; and the denizens of *Se7en*'s city are mired in an apathy: an absence of feeling and passion so profound that they accept as commonplace or perhaps appropriate the whole roster of sins that medieval Christians could recognize as deadly torment to the soul, let alone the body. Each atrocity in the movie turns a mortal sin back onto an egregious sinner of that kind. But aren't we all? The sins are gluttony, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and wrath. The perpetrator – known only as “John Doe” and enacted with chilling plausibility by Kevin Spacey – leaves clues that function in noir fashion as wake-up calls. They are to alert the police to his overall pattern and the public to the larger lessons it is supposed to provoke.
- 14 Mills and Somerset pull out all the stops. They enact most major tropes for noir and many for horror as well. They play hardball by bullying witnesses and cutting legal corners. They tape interrogations. They face reflections. They peer through blinds and frames. They track the beast to his lair, but he eludes them and turns the tables. From the very first murder, Somerset foreshadows the film's fateful, fatal conclusion. He even provides a dose of world-weary voiceover. For all Somerset's sagacity, though, the ruthless cunning of John Doe looms greater. He is the perfectionist monster especially available in vampire films, and he runs rings around the two detectives. In the end, Doe makes them into primary audiences for his jeremiad. Worse, they become the principal props for his desert prophecy of damnation. If the civilization does not somehow turn back from its awful acceptance of sin, it will deserve and reproduce the demonstration that John Doe has provided. Or so *Se7en* would sermonize.
- 15 Somerset calls Mills a “champion.” This little David is the lone

knight of justice from hardboiled detection become the addled knight of justice who tilts at windmills. William keeps trying to tell him that he misconceives the foes, because they are us. In a key scene, they talk in a bar; and the issue for Mills is whether Somerset still cares enough to contest injustice. Mills is right that Somerset does. But Somerset insists that this is not enough; Mills must wake up to the apathy that corrupts current cities – as consumer societies where people favor cheeseburgers over aiding each other.

- 16 Instead Mills targets Doe, who folds Mills into his machinations. When Doe explains his crime spree, in a car on route to the climax, Mills never quite gets it. Doe is doing for society, he says, what Somerset has been trying to do for the naïve Mills: impress on him how people have accepted pervasive, deadly sin as a fact of everyday life. Possibly the worst of the Doe murders is the torture of the slothful man, and sloth is the medieval Christian word for the apathy we all show daily by accepting all seven mortal sins into our modern routines. Does Doe want us mad as hell, too angry to take it any more? Not exactly. When his awful climax finally brings home to Mills the systematic sinfulness that surrounds him, we learn that wrath, too, is a cardinal sin.
- 17 For all its conventions of noir and horror, *Se7en* maintains a Biblical frame inflected for medieval effect. For the first six days, the city in the film experiences the deluge. The detection proceeds in continual rain. This symbolizes by pathetic strategy that the big city is undergoing a time of terrible troubles.¹⁹ Perhaps it is also suffering the flood that can wash away most of its sin and corruption, at least for a little while. Meanwhile the city is being soaked in blood, gore, and torture by the crimes of John Doe. By Sunday, the culminating day, the rain stops. There is still water standing on the streets, but no more pummels down. The sun shines brightly for the climatic drive by Somerset, Mills, and Doe from the drenched city to a dry prairie or desert that stretches beyond it. There the countryside displays no sand dunes, but the grass is parched and intermittent at most. And there, framed by electrical towers, John Doe delivers the punch line to his prophecy. He is a desert father declaring a plague or foreseeing a purge for the city gone bad.
- 18 On his way out of the city, Doe hints at his cryptic plan: bodily symbolism so gruesome that it engages people and makes them ponder his apocalyptic demonstrations of daily sin. Then they will heed his shocking signs and work to repent. Or they will sink

irredeemably further into apathy and their sinful sickness unto ultimate death. The routines of civil sophistication leave us numb to the gravity of sin in ourselves and others. To revive morality, we need to feel mortality. We need to know it in our bones. As sinners in the paws of an apathetic life, we must see our everyday peril far more vividly and sense it far more bodily than before. This is the medieval and postmodern exercise in empathy provided cinematically by *Se7en*. That we may likewise feel anew and acutely the gravity of our own sin, *The Passion* turns from the bodily distention and destruction of our neighbors to the bodily violation and resurrection of our Savior.

The Body in Pain

- 19 *The Passion's* enterprise is for us to know our sin and the sacrifice of Jesus by somehow sensing His pain on the path to Golgotha. In *Resisting Representation*, Elaine Scarry extends her work on *The Body in Pain* by analyzing physical suffering as “obdurate sensation” that humans can communicate only in part and with great difficulty.²⁰ This might seem to make bodily pain or damage unpromising as a trope for symbolizing the awful harm in sin or the incomprehensible sacrifice of Jesus in taking all human harm into Himself, so that it does not instantly destroy the world. We can take Scarry to argue, however, that pharmaceutical companies face a somewhat similar challenge in persuading doctors to prescribe ample amounts of medication to treat pains in their patients.
- 20 To market pain medicine effectively to the sufferers themselves, Scarry shows with ads for magazines and television, the companies need only suggest that the medicines alleviate their target pains in swift and sustained ways. This leads, for example, to before-and-after pictures of pain victims: frowning, rubbing, or saying that some part of the body hurts in the first sequence then smiling to announce that the pain has disappeared by the second. Because they experience the pains for themselves, people viewing these appeals need not be persuaded that the suffering is real and urgent, merely that it can be treated effectively by the advertised medicine.
- 21 But the physicians called to prescribe some medicines are another matter. Like the rest of us, doctors are supposed to face epistemological troubles in sensing reliably and thus responding adequately to any experience as intrinsically internal and personal as pain. As pharmaceutical companies know, moreover, doctors

are especially susceptible to insensitivity for bodily pain on the part of their patients. In order to prosper in their profession, doctors can and often do harden themselves to the suffering of patients. Intentionally or not, typical doctors can inure themselves somewhat to patient feelings and expressions of pain.

- 22 Arguably there are several routes to this semi-necessary disability. The sensitivity and response of physicians to patient pains decline as doctor experiences of patients in pain become grindingly familiar. Doctors desensitize themselves because they cannot afford psychologically to feel along, empathetically, with their patients. Or doctors may have trouble feeling along with their patients because the doctors have not experienced for themselves many of the same kinds of pain. At a “deeper” level, the modern epistemologist maintains, doctors must face such limits on feeling because they cannot get inside another’s suffering. Moreover doctors cannot even read a patient’s suffering in many cases from bodily signs, which can be subtle or simply absent. As a result, research by pharmaceutical companies suggests, too many doctors do not empathize or even sympathize adequately with patients in pain. Hence doctors do not prescribe alleviating medicines or other treatments in accordance with the best-practice instructions approved by the medical profession.
- 23 This is why medical schools now require courses on pain and its treatment, yet epistemic barriers for pain remain between doctors and patients. In consequence, patients suffer more than need be, because doctors underutilize existing resources for ameliorating pain. At any rate, they do not buy as many prescription pain medications as the pharmaceutical companies want to sell. For reasons good as well as bad, presumably, physicians sometimes practice the anti-empathy encompassed in what Robert Jay Lifton has called “psychic numbing.”²¹
- 24 So the challenge for pharmaceutical companies is to make patient pains clear, legible, or otherwise adequately apprehensible to doctors. Then the doctors can comprehend the needs of their patients for prescription of the pharmaceuticals sold to redress pains. When pharmaceutical companies sell their wares over-the-counter to consumers, without the intermediation of doctors and prescriptions, ads can devote much more time, space, and creative talent to depicting patient relief (from pains). So these ads show patients active, festive, visibly feeling good. The ads also provide testimonials from people about how dramatically better the medicines have helped them feel. Sometimes the pharmaceutical

advertising pursues this path for prescription drugs as well, urging each prospective patient to “ask your doctor about” help from the drug at issue. But when the pharmaceutical companies target the doctors directly, Scarry notices, the persuasive strategy shifts to vivid depictions of pain by discoloring, distending, and otherwise distorting body parts.

- 25 Ads for physicians seldom depict whole people as individuals in pain. Instead they twist arms, shatter legs, peel joints, diagram nerves, wither organs, inflate vessels, open skulls, pound hands, pierce feet, shred skin, and so on. In these ads, the hypertrophy of muscles in pain looks like a gallery of close-ups from super-villain photos. As in the Gibson movie, the ads portray individual sites of affliction as physically transformed by torments that induce horrendous pains taken to arise at these sites. The ads might show doctors whole faces grimacing in pain, but they favor foreheads in flames or kidneys exploding. At times, they display entire bodies contorted in pain; but they feature elbows stabbed by knives, temples pounded by hammers, throats purple with infection, or toes swollen seemingly beyond the point of bursting. The logics and aesthetics are those of magical realism, where fantastic events and radical exaggerations convey disorders so deep and potentially devastating that they elude ordinary modes of human communication and comprehension.
- 26 Gibson’s film implies the plausible principle that even the most devout of Christians can be like the desensitized doctors. How can people imagine, how can they *feel* the terrible evil, the horrible pain of human sin? Gibson’s answer – in the form of *The Passion* – is similar to the one that Scarry ascribes to pharmaceutical companies. To display awful bodily wounds in lingering, graphic, sickening detail might work for many viewers. The hope is that a religious experience of graphic injuries to Jesus can spring from overwhelming observational impact of the images.
- 27 The dynamic is closely akin to gross-out horror. America’s master of that move has been Stephen King.²² Verbally or visually, he crafts images meant to overwhelm our everyday senses of reality. These horrifying sights and sounds would overpower our ordinary capacities of calm, measured, critical assessment. We flinch and twitch out of the way. We yelp and groan in reply. We feel sick at heart, unsettled in mind. What we see and hear (or think in response) edges into awe. For a moment, at least, it is beyond ugly, beyond beautiful; beyond good and bad; beyond true or false. It is simultaneously subliminal and superliminal, thus

sublime. It is at once awful and awesome. It provokes revulsion, wonder, and possibly repentance.²³

- 28 Observes Ansen, “There is real power in Gibson’s filmmaking: he knows how to work an audience over.” But Ansen’s critical concern is that “The dark, queasy strength of the images – artfully shot by Caleb Deschanel – and their duration (the scene in which the Roman soldiers tie Jesus down and torture him goes on endlessly) tends to overwhelm the ostensible message.”²⁴ What this worry misses is that Gibson’s movie does not operate mainly in the communicational mode of some articulated “message,” ostensible or otherwise. *The Passion* means to overwhelm, by providing experiences of sin that it takes us to resist with most of the modern skills of intellect and articulation available to us.²⁵ Hyper-reality does engage some people, and presumably many in our electronic times, whose apathy or other resistance to attending and feeling along with their neighbors can reach the disturbing levels evoked in films such as *Se7en*.
- 29 The resistance to facing our sins can be especially strong, and there is no guarantee of cinematic success through *The Passion*’s devices or any others. Viewers vary. “From a purely dramatic point of view,” says Ansen of *The Passion*, “the relentless gore is self-defeating.”²⁶ No doubt that is true for some viewers, whereas others can open themselves to vivid senses of sin only when overwhelmed by hyper-real sights and sounds on the order of *The Passion*. And what works for one or two or three screenings might dull and numb some viewers by a fourth or fifth.
- 30 Yet for many, not even acutely realistic pictures are persuasive, let alone empathetic. Abuse photos from the Abu Ghraib prison had poured from televisions and newspapers for days when a survey showed that only a third of Americans would agree that torture had occurred there on the U.S. watch. It is telling that the same survey recorded four-fifths and more of Americans defined “torture” to include some of the acts dramatically visible in these pictures.²⁷ Empathy, persuasion, or even the most minimal recognition can be excruciatingly hard to effect at times, especially for (other) bodies in pain.
- 31 To witness damage to another’s body need not be much the same as feeling damage to your own. The degrees of similarity, kinds of association, and modes of feeling can depend on empathy. Like *Se7en*, Gibson’s *Passion* relies on vividly realistic images and horrendously realistic sounds to give viewers a sense of suffering

sins that they usually resist experiencing. The sights and sounds feature bodily tortures. The physical or nervous pains of the body might not be much the same as the moral or mental pains of the soul. Still this is the connection that Gibson pursues. Aesthetically it is a familiar move in western civilization, possibly effective for many Christians and others. The same goes for the further echoes between physical and spiritual pain. To mobilize our emotions as viewers, Gibson's film packs its pictures with gore as graphic bodily passion.

- 32 The torment extends to the soundtrack. It vocalizes pain in bodily, inarticulate sounds. It also turns the voices toward sounds purged of meanings that are not emotional. The Jews speak in Aramaic, and the Romans in Latin, so the audience hears passions rather than words. (It sees subtitles for the words in its own language.) The aural dynamics of Gibson's *Passion* are more or less operatic. As Stanley Cavell says, the words sung in opera become "passionate speech."²⁸ Attention shifts from logos to pathos. The film's effort is to make our virtual experience of Jesus suffering our sins as full-bodied as cinema permits. The aim of *The Passion* is empathy.

The Movement to Act

- 33 The empathy is to move us into ethical action. David Hume, Adam Smith, and other figures of the Scottish Enlightenment held that humans have a faculty of sympathy to inform good judgments of value.²⁹ The argument is that human reason requires a decent sense of any situation to judge it accurately, and sympathy is the capacity of imagination that can bring the situations of others adequately before the calm and measuring eye of rationality. Gibson's *Passion* presumes that sympathy is not enough for decent judgment of conditions beyond our ken, beyond the scope of what the Scottish Enlightenment called our common sense – especially when we resist looking in the face what we dread as strange and terrifying.³⁰
- 34 With Aristotle, the film also anticipates the lapse of ethical action through weakness of will. This commonplace difficulty gets radicalized by the dread and other resistance in settings faced by *Se7en* and *The Passion*, even when overwhelming images can overcome our ordinary incapacities of judgment. Again in these truly extreme circumstances, the reasonable expectation is that sympathy is not enough to induce appropriate action.

- 35 The need is for empathy. To inform judgment and energize will sufficiently in settings beyond our usual horizons, Gibson's *Passion* joins *Se7en* in pursuing fuller-bodied experiences that can induce empathy. Thus the two films share a cinematic strategy. Both augment the vicarious experience familiar from most discussions of cinema with symbolical experience. But more than that, they rely strongly on the special resources of virtual experience. The prominence of virtual experience to provoke empathy for moving us into ethical action puts *The Passion* and *Se7en* into the same provinces as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Notes

- ¹ David Denby, "Nailed: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*," *New Yorker*, 80, 2, March 1, 2004, pp. 84-86, on p. 86.
- ² Roger Ebert, "Powerful Tale of *Passion* Soaked in Extreme Violence," *Cedar Rapids - Iowa City Gazette*, February 26, 2004, p. 4W.
- ³ See Sean Smith, "Will Oscar Listen?" *Newsweek*, 144, 17, October 25, 2004, pp. 98-99.
- ⁴ See "The Passion of the Arab World," *Atlantic Monthly*, 294, 1, July-August, 2004, p. 62; from Aluma Dankowitz, "Reactions in the Arab Media to *The Passion of the Christ*," Middle East Research Institute, April 21, 2004, http://www.memri.de/uebersetzungen_analysen/themen/liberal_voices/ges_passion_christ_21_04_04.html.
- ⁵ See Sean Smith, "Who'll Buy Mel's Movie?" *Newsweek*, 142, 15, October 13, 2004, p. 72; Sean Smith, "Passion Play," *Newsweek*, 142, 18, November 3, 2003, p. 12; Jon Meacham, "Who Killed Jesus?" *Newsweek*, 143, 7, February 16, 2004, pp. 44-53; David Ansen, "So What's the Good News? The Debate Over *The Passion* May Be Less Harsh than the Film," *Newsweek*, 143, 9, March 1, 2004, p. 60; David Gates, "Jesus Christ Movie Star," *Newsweek*, 143, 10, March 8, 2004, pp. 50-52; Anna Quindlen, "At the Left Hand of God," *Newsweek*, 143, 10, March 8, 2004, p. 64.
- ⁶ See David Denby, "The Quick and the Dead: *Bon Voyage* and *Dogville*," *New Yorker*, 80, 6, March 29, 2004, pp. 103-105, on p. 103; Denby, "Nailed."

- ⁷ Through June, the Internet Movie Database says, *The Passion* had grossed over \$370 million in the United States alone. By the September release of the DVD, the worldwide gross had reached \$600 million. Reportedly it cost Gibson \$30 million to make, and he is reaping most of the profit.
- ⁸ See Amy Sullivan, "Jesus Christ, Superstar: When Hollywood Stopped Making Bible Movies, Right-Wing Christians Took Over," *Washington Monthly*, 36, 6, June, 2004, pp. 48-51.
- ⁹ Ansen, "So What's the Good News?" p. 60.
- ¹⁰ Ebert, "Powerful Tale of *Passion* Soaked in Extreme Violence."
- ¹¹ Keith E. Gottschalk, " *Passion* Offers Brutal but Honest Portrayal," *Cedar Rapids - Iowa City Gazette*, February 26, 2004, p. 4W.
- ¹² See Mark Rahner, "Second Thoughts as Gibson's *Passion* Hits DVD," *Seattle Times* reprinted in the *Cedar Rapids - Iowa City Gazette*, September 6, 2004, p. 2W.
- ¹³ See Denby, "Nailed," p. 84.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Denby, "The Quick and the Dead," p. 103.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ See Robert Hariman, "No One Is In Charge Here: Ryszard Kapucinski's Anatomy of the Courtly Style," *Political Style*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 51-94.
- ¹⁸ Denby, "Nailed," p. 84.
- ¹⁹ On the pathetic strategy, see John S. Nelson, *Tropes of Politics*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, pp. 141-143.
- ²⁰ See Elaine Scarry: *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985; "Obdurate Sensation: Pain," *Resisting Representation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 13-48.
- ²¹ See Robert Jay Lifton: *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, New York, Random House, 1967; *Home from the War; Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners*, New York, Simon

and Schuster, 1973.

22 On gross-out horror, see Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, New York, Berkley Books, 1981, pp. 4 and 23-28.

23 On overwhelming images, see John S. Nelson, "Horror, Crisis, and Control: Tales of Facing Evil," American Political Science Association, New Orleans, 1985.

24 Ansen, "So What's the Good News?"

25 On beyond communication and resistant to representation, see Scarry, *Resisting Representation*; John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999. Laurence A. Rickels, *The Vampire Lectures*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

26 Ansen, "So What's the Good News?" p. 60.

27 The survey was released by the *Washington Post* and ABC News at the end of May. See *Houston Chronicle*, <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/nation/2597834>.

28 See Stanley Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice," *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 129-169.

29 See John S. Nelson, "Voices and Musics in Political Telespots: Emotions as Reasons in Public Arguments," *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Summer Conference on Argumentation*, Charles Arthur Willard, ed., Washington, DC, National Communication Association, 2005, forthcoming.

30 On facing, see Barbara J. Hill and John S. Nelson, "Facing the Holocaust: Robert Arneson's Ceramic Myth of Postmodern Catastrophe," *Human Rights / Human Wrongs: Art and Social Change*, Robert Hobbs and Fredrick Woodard, eds., Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1986, pp. 189-209; Nelson, "Horror, Crisis, and Control: Tales of Facing Evil." On dread, see Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, Walter Lowrie, tr., Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1944.