Violent Affect, Aesthetic Intimacy and Salvific Pain in The Passion Of The Christ

Anthony McCosker, University of Melbourne, Australia

It should not be surprising that an ultra-violent image of the final hours of Jesus' life emerged in a post September 11, 2001 global media context. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) was willed into production by a conservative and perhaps reactive desire for cultural renewal at a time when the certainty of Western cultural dominance had been violently challenged. By focusing exclusively on the capture, torture, humiliation, and death of Jesus, the film presented an intriguing approach to the "classically over determined" (Groebner, 2004: 88), yet foundational Christian sign of Christ on the cross by reviving the Passion images and plays of late medieval Europe. In the process, the film courted controversy for its depiction of Jewish culpability, but was nonetheless highly successful at the box office around the world and in the US in particular. [1] This success could not have been possible without the acceptance by Christian groups of the film's graphic violence.

Marketing and distribution strategies for *The Passion of the Christ* were community oriented, and as with many of the films depicting the life of Jesus before it, local church communities and leaders were targeted to aid promotion (Maresco, 2004; Babington and Evans, 1993). The film was able to successfully segment its market, appealing directly to the diverse range of Christian denominations as well as ordinary movie goers looking for spectacle and bloodshed. Such market segmentation strategies were by no means guaranteed to work for this film. While there is a strong base of evangelical Christianity in the US willing to consume and use products of popular culture to advance their faith, they have traditionally condemned violent cinema. Likewise, the Restricted (18+) rating in most countries excluded children and discouraged family viewing.

Protestant, progressive and liberal Christians, Catholics, evangelicals, and ordinary movie-goers all accepted the Biblical content and the spectacular and dramatic violence. These groups were enticed to see the film through careful pre-release and invitation only screenings, standard film promotion strategies, and through Christian television, radio and congregational communication. A broadly integrative form of support was established, enabled by online promotional and communication tools, bringing communities of viewers together to discuss and support the film (Maresco, 2004; Grace, 2004). In a significant step toward global success, Gibson also secured the crucial endorsement of Pope John Paul II, using his reported words "It is as it was" to confirm the film's religious authority. By all of these means, and with the help of Christian communities of practice around the world, the film became a global "visual event," to use Nicholas Mirzoeff's (1998: 3) phrase.

Audience appraisal and financial success are all the more surprising here given the film's ultra-violent aesthetics and its narrow focus on the arrest, torture and crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the sustained intensity and detail of the violence stands it apart from the history of "Christ films" and biblical epics (Babington and Evans, 1993). Very little screen time is given over to the life or teachings of Jesus, and the brief glimpses we do get in flashbacks serve to

provide a striking point of contrast against the "violated" body of Jesus that fills the film. This strategy for conveying the Christian message has its roots in the late medieval imagery of the Passion and the texts that provided instruction on how to see and experience Jesus' suffering as a central tenet of devotional practice (e.g., Merback, 1999; Groebner 2004; Enders, 1999). In this article, I consider the visual and affective strategies of the film as a mechanism for establishing empathic intimacy and religious or cultural commitment, and explore the roots of this image of foundational Christian violence in late medieval passion art. I am less interested in why salvific pain should resurface with such voracity and success through the film than the question of why Christian audiences may have been prepared to accept it so readily, and the role the ultra-violence might play in establishing a sense of community among those audiences.

For Elizabeth Grosz, any violence is highly controversial in an "age of uncontrollable and uncontained violent reactions, that is, in the age of state and national violences, violences enacted in the name of a region, a people, a religion, which is to say, in the age of terrorism" (Grosz, 2005: 55). Violence carries, and is carried by, a highly affective visual content. It takes the form of a significant "sense memory" in visual culture, not simply presenting "the horrific scene, the graphic spectacle of violence, but the physical imprint of the ordeal of violence: a (compromised and compromising) position to see *from*" (Bennett, 2005: 39). That is, regardless of the theological goals of *The Passion of the Christ*, its relentless focus on the violence of Jesus' death is deliberately designed to engage viewers' bodies empathically, bypassing narrative or signification for affective intensity, aiming less for debate than the simplicity of the nervous system. Clare Colebrook (2005: 199) notes that "the power of art is ethical: the power not just to present this or that affect, but to bring us to an experience of 'affectuality' – *of the fact that there is affect*." In this respect the image of Jesus' bodily suffering in *The Passion of the Christ* takes the intensity of affect itself as the message and the means for generating an alarming form of shared spectatorial experience as figuration and narrative gives way to the immediacy and simplicity of the event of Jesus' suffering and death.

Context

The visual brutality of *The Passion of the Christ* was broadly criticised in public commentary and reviews following its release. Such a sustained and intense image of heroic victimisation and sacrifice courts controversy not least for its inevitable establishment of us and them, good and evil, hero and villain or innocence and guilt. A significant line of debate criticised the film and Gibson personally for reviving the anti-Semitism perceived to underpin the passion narrative as an attempt to re-establish the culpability of Jewish people in the torture, humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus (e.g., Ariel, 2004). This concern may have been reasonable given the history of Passion plays in Europe, and also given Gibson's more recent anti-Jewish public tirades. There was, however, little evidence of anti-Semitic reaction amongst viewers of the film (Ibid.: 37). If the film was able to generate enmity through its violent treatment of Jesus, it was not necessarily along traditional Christian-Jewish lines. Another cultural and historical context may have provided a stronger framework for the film and its reception.

The Passion of the Christ appeared at a time of global insecurity with the US fighting a "war on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a conservative government with a "born again" President fuelling nationalist sentiment and pride. This context cannot be ignored. In response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, George W.

Bush famously staked a clearly divisive claim: "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror." [2] These statements were underpinned by the often repeated television images of the falling World Trade Centre towers, encouraging a sentiment of unity in the name of retaliation. Susan Buck-Morss (2003: 23), among many others, notes the "brutal simplification" behind Bush's statement. Likewise, in his critique of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, Edward Said (2001) pointed to the damaging implications of the polarising challenge and its positioning of a Christian West against a generalised Islamic cultural other. The complexity of culture, belief, ways of life and individual ways of being in the world were reduced to a false yet powerful dichotomy. The force of this dichotomy may have receded in the wake of the drawn-out and violent insurgency following the initially "clinical" invasion of Iraq, but it did set the ground rules against which audiences of the violent treatment of Jesus in Gibson's film were also invited to take a position.

I will not argue that the context of a global war on terror was a requisite for the success of *The Passion of the Christ*, or served as the only framework through which it was received. It did, however, ensconce the film within a generalised sense of polarity, and fostered a broader sense of cultural vulnerability in which the victim of violence could serve as a rallying point. In this way the film stands as a powerful example of the elevation of "the figure of the victim to a position of moral superiority" in postcolonial societies (Bennett, 2005: 5). To claim victimhood in the context of foundational religious imagery is to participate in a wider struggle for cultural dominance. As a rallying point, the film can be seen as an invitation to feel *for* rather than *against*. In fact empathy *with* Jesus rather than enmity *against* Judaism was the more common response among Christian audiences (Woods, Jindra and Baker, 2004). The "gut wrenching violence" was seen to facilitate a sense of belonging, helping sympathetic and disparate groups of Christian viewers connect with others (Ibid.: 171). This seeming contradiction also has a theological basis in Christian "salvific pain," a powerful, immediate and affective tool for Christian devotional practice honed and perfected in the artwork and printed texts of late medieval Europe.

A conservative theological program driven by the Vatican under the Papacy of John Paul II also laid the framework for Gibson's violent vision of Christian piety. Through the late John Paul II, medieval theology of "salvific pain" gained a renewed weight, and was promoted explicitly in his 1984 text *Salvifici Doloris*. In the *Salvifici Doloris*, the Church, the suffering body of Jesus, and the devotional suffering of Paul are tied together as the basis of a theology of salvation. [3] There is an instructional strain to the Pontiff's exploration of suffering and faith that resonates both with *The Passion of the Christ* and late medieval theology and devotional practices. In his *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II promotes this doctrine and practice:

> As a result of Christ's salvific work, man exists on earth with the hope of eternal life and holiness. And even though the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ in his Cross and Resurrection does not abolish temporal suffering from human life, nor free from suffering the whole historical dimension of human existence, it nevertheless throws a new light upon this dimension and upon every suffering: the light of salvation. (John Paul II, 1984: IV 15)

The *Salvifici Doloris* renews the call to contemplate Jesus' suffering as a method of devotional practice that aims to establish an empathic intimacy and shared experience for devotees, particularly those who feel they are wronged or who themselves are suffering. This

matches Gibson's stated aims for *The Passion of the Christ*: to function as a tool for promoting the atonement theology of shared Guilt (Grace 2004). He notoriously filmed his own hand holding the nail that pins Jesus' arm to the cross as an expression of his commitment (Ibid.: 13). [4] Within this logic, built on the Jewish theology of the scapegoat, Jesus takes the place of the sacrificial lamb, a substitute for our own punishment, so that the community of followers can once again be reconciled with God and enter Heaven. To explain such ritualised sacrifice, anthropologist René Girard considers its role as essential in establishing and maintaining human communities. For Girard, ritual sacrifice functions as a mechanism for displacing intra-group violence as a kind of mimetic scapegoating mechanism (Girard 1988: 83-87). As in the theology of atonement, the scapegoat in Girard's notion of sacrifice takes on the violence or sins of the community and is essentially expelled or outcast in the process of sacrifice to restore social order.

However, to read *The Passion of the Christ* through either the notion of atonement (as Gibson seems to prefer) or mimetic scapegoating (as a way of explaining its social function in restoring social harmony) prioritises the intended and received meaning and projects an ideal social effect for the film. These doctrines provide some useful insight, but neither really addresses the cinematic qualities, the visual strategies and the voracity of the violence or the affective intensity of the suffering presented, nor explains their broad acceptance or *how* the film might function to build a sense of community across such a broad array of viewers, many of whom would normally condemn that violent aesthetic.

Salvific pain, as a tool for devotional practice, deemphasises the narrative of the teachings and figuration of Jesus' life by focusing on the concept and visual experience of Jesus' bodily pain as the object and instrument of devotion. At its base is the violation of the body of Jesus and the affective receptivity (or vulnerability) of the contemplator. Gibson's choice of James Caviezel as Jesus sets the focus of *The Passion of the Christ* around a tall, strong, striking body. This Jesus is sternly masculine and carries himself even under the weight of chains, torture and the cross with a physical presence that also carries the film. As I illustrate in more detail below, on his body the visual drama moves through highly affective stages of defacement and degradation. In this composition of Jesus, audiences are given intimate access to Christ's "salvific work," and are invited to see their viewing experience as itself a salvific act.

In commentaries and reviews, the point of reference for aesthetic comparisons was most commonly renaissance artworks such as Carravaggio's *The Flagellation of Christ* (Morgan, 2004). The film's cinematographer, Caleb Deschanel, himself referred to Renaissance art as a key visual inspiration (Bailey and Pizzello, 2004). However, despite iconic similarities with some Renaissance art, it is actually late-medieval Europe that established the highly affective, perhaps violent, visual culture that gave way in the renaissance to lyricism, narrative and figuration, and that forms the foundation of the affective power of Gibson's film. *The Passion of the Christ* clearly resembles late medieval imagery and texts of the Passion, but this resemblance is by no means superficial. Each reveals in the other a useful way of thinking about affect and the visual, and about the corporeality of spectatorship in the powerful coalescence of "faith" and visual culture.

Salvific Pain and Visual Passion in Late Medieval Europe

Claims of ontological equivalence for *The Passion of the Christ* – the notion that "it is as it was" – contradict what is known about the role of salvific images of the Passion and their

origin in medieval Europe. By the late middle ages, images of the Passion functioned not as a direct transposition of the Bible into visual form, but rather "conveyed the essence of Christ's sacrifice, the meaning of suffering, by promoting and facilitating an empathic imitation of Christ" (Bennett, 2005: 36). Fifteenth-century Europe was a time of changing and expanding media forms. Realistic oil painting in vivid colour rose in importance, and during the second half of the century "an explosion of technologies of reproduction with the new media of wood cuts and copper engravings disseminated devotional images in tens of thousands of copies" (Groebner, 2004: 91). Artists commissioned by Church or Sovereign worked to find ways of "closing the gap" (Ibid.: 34) between the Bible, Jesus' embodied experience in the Passion and material image, and this was most effectively achieved by visualising the wounds and instruments of Jesus' suffering, bypassing the need for lengthy narrative.

Across medieval Europe, while there remained uneasiness about the use of images for popular immersion in the theology of Christ's salvific pain, [5] they nonetheless played a sustained and significant role in drawing a diverse populace, including the illiterate, toward the practices and values of the Church (Kamerick, 2002). This imagery was also tied to the visual language of the disciplinary practices of public corporal punishment (Merback, 1999; Enders, 1999; Bestul, 1996; Groebner, 2004) as a means for integrating religious devotion with social control.

Although we cannot make assumptions about how Passion plays and graphic images of Jesus' suffering on the cross were experienced in late medieval Europe, it is becoming clear that such images "were instruments aimed at an audience" (Groebner, 2004: 32). That is, the depictions of Jesus' wounds and detailed accounts of his suffering and crucifixion were tools for training the emotions, indications as to how to feel, and how to express those feelings (Ibid.: 32). What emerged in this late medieval visual culture, to be revived and given cinematic form in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, was an apparatus for a shared form of devotion that guides individuals and connects followers *through* the violated body of Jesus by means of the affects generated in the act of contemplation.

As a method of devotional practice, *imitatio Christi* was encouraged as early as the Twelfth Century, but also relates to traditions of stoicism, asceticism and martyrdom spanning the history of Christianity (Bynum, 1996). [6] In *imitatio Christi*, "revelation proceeds from bodily affect; the stigmatic does not read his or her wounds but *feels* their true meaning" (Bennett, 2005: 39). The aspirations of the faithful were bound to the body's potential for physical pain, and symbolic mimicry of Jesus' own wounds. In effect, the ascetic and self-flagellating practices were an imitation of Christ's suffering that an ordinary citizen could, to a lesser degree, achieve by other means. The teachings of the Franciscan monks, and popular Latin and vernacular instructional texts such as the fourteenth century *Mediations on the Life of Christ* (attributed to Bonaventure), provided accessible narrative accounts of the Passion of Jesus along with instruction on how to understand the lessons of Christ's suffering and crucifixion (Bestul, 1996).

Imitatio Christi also referred to a way of seeing, a mechanics of visuality. Biernoff (2005: 4) explores the epistemological and ontological framework of this period, detailed in the writings of Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, where the object of sight was thought to impress "its form on the responsive matter of the eye or brain" in a way that was understood to produce a transformation in the interior of the person seeing. [7] Worshipers and artists were also influenced by Martin Luther's decree that the ordinary Christian faithful contemplate the bloody body of Jesus, and "cleanse the eyes of one's heart by immersion in

the wounds of Christ" (quoted in Groebner, 2004: 97). The act of cleansing the eyes with the image of bodily pain designates the physical engagement of this purifying viewing experience. Somewhere between disciplinary terror and a productive form of "affective piety" the bodily suffering of Jesus stood as a tool for bringing subjects into the fold of Christian belief, devotion and self-knowing (Merback, 1999; Biernoff, 2002, 2005; Groebner 2004).

Lay devotion in the late medieval period centred on the contemplation of Passion artworks adorning church walls and altarpieces, attending Passion plays, and if one was literate, reading the instructional texts or illustrated prayer books providing "vivid, pictorial writing" describing the horror of the scourging, tormenting and crucifixion of Jesus (Bestul, 1996; Kamerick, 2002). Image, belief and experience enter into a complex relation here. In his study of late medieval crucifixion art, Merback argues that,

> For medieval people, the experience of *seeing and imagining* a body that was ravaged and bleeding from the tortures inflicted upon it lay at the centre of a constellation of religious doctrines, beliefs and devotional practices. Meditative devotions to the Passion of Christ required a form of contemplative immersion in the grisly details of His affliction from one station of the cross to another. (Merback, 1999: 19)

This sets the late medieval Passion imagery of European Christianity apart from similar images of the renaissance. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Flagellation of Christ* (1607) and *Christ at the Column* (1607), for example, present a sense of intimacy in a different manner. These images are striking in their use of light and the clean serenity of Jesus' body. There is a sense of the event, and the narrative, but also a sense of Jesus' body as somehow distant to the ordeal of violence to which the images relate.

Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries meditation on the suffering body of Jesus was facilitated more dramatically and viscerally by a range of texts and artworks across Europe (Marrow, 1979; Merback 1999). Major artists to produce vivid, violent paintings and prints of the Passion included Robert Campin, Jan Provoost, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Mathias Grünewald, Jörg Breu, Michael Wolgemut and Albrecht Dürer. Along with these, a plethora of less well known artists and anonymous artworks brought scenes of the Passion to life in painting, prints and text illustrations that were becoming increasingly accessible to the merchant and noble classes along with the cloistered clergy.

Merback describes a typical 1480 engraving titled *Calvary with Riders*, by the Master I.A.M. von Zwolle, where the thieves "struggle in painful torpor against the binding cords, refusing to bend to the will of the apparatus" (Merback, 1999: 75). The viewer is drawn into what Merback (Ibid.: 75) calls "staged battles between victim and apparatus, body and weapon," and these "form the primary *Gestalt*, the element of experiential immediacy, in these images, and give them their sometimes unbearable palpability" (Ibid.: 75). The goal is always the same. An intense, embodied devotional experience is established for the viewer through the imagery of the tortured thieves alongside Jesus' own personal suffering, an aesthetic tool "for helping lay people foster a deeper personal involvement with the events of the Passion" (Ibid.: 100).

Although much crucifixion art of the late medieval period is filled with meaningful and iconic figures suggesting narrative depth, it is the affective features, the wounds and bodily contortions of the crucified thieves that stand out from that background. In the Burges

triptych *The Descent from the Cross* (c.1430) for example, Robert Campin depicted the torture of the thief in explicit agony (Thürlemann, 2002: 138). The arms are drawn painfully backwards over a T-shaped cross, legs also bound tightly. A viewer's attention is deliberately drawn to the striking detail of the broken legs, bones almost protruding from the twisted flesh, the deep gashes at the breaks and dripping blood. Here and in other late medieval images of the Passion, wounding becomes a mechanism of a corporeal spectatorship that has salvific devotion as its purpose and function.

The Burges triptych is not uncommon amongst late medieval devotional imagery where the operative element "is not the narrative framework but the affective detail (the wound). Bodily response thus precedes the inscription of narrative, of moral emotion or empathy" (Bennett, 2005: 36). And there is a dynamic sense of participation or even intimacy here. As Beckwith argues, this type of "affective piety is obsessed with belonging, with the fantasy of fusion and the bitter reality of separation, and so with the entrances to Christ's body" (Beckwith, 1993: 42), that is in enabling a pious form of shared, but private intimacy through his wounds.

A Cinematic Composition of Bodily Pain: Scourging and Crucifying

In an essay on *The Passion* included in the Miramax-produced book supporting the film, evangelical scholar Ben Witherington recounts a revealing and somewhat representative response to the film. He describes his experience in a kind of over-stimulated physical sense. He uses the words "numb" and then "overwhelmed" and asks "who wants to see their best friend beat up for two straight hours?" (Witherington, 2004: 81). Witherington's account provides some insight into both the "intensity" of many responses to the film, and to the film's ability to polarise or unify viewers through its violence. This is a very literal expression of affection, a projected friendship with the figure of Christ that is not uncommon among conservative Christian viewers who have spoken about the film (Woods, Jindra and Baker, 2004). As a celebration of Christianity through the ultra violence of Jesus' torture and crucifixion, the film was in this way able to produce an ambiguous affect of repulsion and attraction or *affection* to promote a dual sense of Jesus as other (sacrificed to save "us"), and as *friend*.

Like the late medieval artworks of the Passion, *The Passion of the Christ* draws on and makes expert use of art's power to "bring us to an experience of 'affectuality'" (Colebrook, 2005: 199), through its aversive and yet ironically compelling affects of violent suffering. In a book on Gilles Deleuze written prior to the release of the film, but in this instance highly prescient of it, Colebrook uses the example of a Catholic procession of the crucifix to illustrate the micropolitics of affect. Members of the procession are united through common affect generated within the group, and together they:

> …feel the pain, the suffering, the mourning, the melancholy and elevation. This is a political event, but not because the procession is a way of imposing the meanings of Christianity on the crowd (although that may happen subsequently). The politics here lie in the relation between image and perceivers, the desiring investment in affect. The event produces a group through an organization and coding of intensities. (Colebrook, 2002: 46)

Similarly, *The Passion of the Christ* attempts to generate a shared experience by detailing Jesus' torture, humiliation, exhaustion and eventual death by crucifixion. It uses dismay, disgust, abhorrence or even outrage, to generate a deeply felt empathy for this beaten figure

as a form of shared affection. There are of course other possibilities for the visual experience, and as always the space for cynical rejection or opposition. But a more interesting question here is how this aversive affect can become a positive and unifying cultural experience for sympathetic and empathic viewers.

If we take, as Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 164) do, the work of art as "*a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects,*" detached from a particular point of view, the role of the sustained violent sensation becomes clear. This composition of aversive affects allows and enables a kind of attraction or intimacy, or at least introduces a point of intense relation and integration. A sympathetic viewer, though perhaps overwhelmed and repulsed, may equally be drawn into a positive affective relationship. Like the artworks of the medieval tradition, *The Passion of the Christ* works on and through the bodies depicted and those who view (or endure) them. As with the contemporary paintings of Francis Bacon (Deleuze, 2003), for instance, Gibson's target is the sensation itself, that which we are all able to feel or imagine feeling. By presenting the Passion as the focus of a cinematic event Gibson, like the medieval Passion artists, seeks to mobilise the potential of the pain-image, the image of Jesus as a bloc of sensations, a compound of percepts and affects, as a tool for deeply uniting viewers, more or less deeply affected by the salvific pain of Jesus' final hours.

Two major scenes form the basis of the composition of Jesus' bodily pain and establish the film's peaks of intensity: the scourging and the crucifixion. These two points in the film carry the most severe violation of Jesus' body and mark the film most clearly as a Passion play; agony, distress, sorrow and perhaps affection blur within their rising tumult.

Scourging

The scourging scene occupies around fifteen minutes of screen time half way through the film. Rather than the Bible, Gibson reportedly draws his graphically violent account of the scourging from *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, the recorded visions of the eighteenth century German mystic, Anne Catherine Emmerich. In Gibson's words, *The Dolorous Passion* "supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of" (Grace, 2004: 15). Despite the rhetoric of fidelity, elaboration on biblical accounts of Jesus' agony is as essential for Gibson as it was to Emmerich and the artists of the late middle ages. As Kamerick (2002: 159) notes of medieval English prayer books, the multiplication and elaboration of the "Instruments of the Passion" meant that "anyone might be able to ponder the physical pain and symbolic meaning of the lance, crown of thorns, whip, column, the nails and the forceps used to withdraw them from Christ's body." Likewise, the scourging scene provides a familiar image of painful torture. It builds in intensity as the instruments of torture bear their devastating effects on Jesus' increasingly lifeless body.

In the scourging, signifiers of bodily pain are drawn from the implements of torture, mechanisms of corporal punishment and sovereign power. Chained over a stone post, Jesus is beaten for what seems an unbearable amount of screen time. There is a slight pause or lingering over the official procedures, and over the "instruments" of the torture. The Roman soldiers test canes by flexing them, and we glimpse other viciously spiked implements such as lashes, barbed flails, spiked clubs and chains. First, a cane is used to lacerate Jesus' back, causing bloody welts, while the palpable sound of the cane striking flesh fills the scene with an "overwhelming" sense of pain and physical vulnerability. The cane is eventually replaced, and the torturer suggests a club with long spikes at its end (which seems too devastating, too violent) before a barbed leather flail is taken up instead. As the flail begins to open criss-

crossing gashes in Jesus' flesh, an apex of intensity is reached with the close-up shot of the barbs digging into Jesus' side before being violently ripped out. That shot is followed by the close-up image of Mary's distraught face recoiling from the scene as the torture continues unseen.

Many scholars note the parallel between late medieval Passion art and the public spectacle of corporal punishment and execution. In his account of the texts of the Passion, for example, Bestul notes the parallel between the "trajectory of increasing bodily violence" and the rise in the thirteenth century of juridical torture. The Passion plays drew their power from the spectacle of punishment on the scaffold. For Jody Enders, "Those spatialized bodies (or embodied spaces) are then subject to the regulatory and disciplinary interventions of rhetoric as the human body itself becomes the ultimate space on which to brand lessons, speeches, feelings, laws and verisimilar visions of information" (Enders, 1999: 97). Groebner (2004: 101) cites an example of a 1492 Passion play in Frankfurt in which the crosses were set up at the site of punishment outside the Gallows Gate. Imagery of the implements of Christ's torture can be found throughout late medieval devotional texts: "Intense concentration on each stage, each moment of Christ's agony led to the multiplication of the Instruments of the Passion so that no item involved in his torture would go unconsidered" (Kamerick, 2002: 159). In each of these contexts, the punitive actions of torture carry a visual strategy aimed at drawing on the truth value of bodily pain maintained through the punitive institution of public torture. As Foucault (1977) recognised in his account of the strategy of the punitive technique of the scaffold, the body of the condemned is not the only body affected, or "produced;" the target is also the onlooker.

The skill of the medieval artists of the Passion was in their ability to isolate the affects, to present sensations in their pure form for devotional viewers. This is by no means an easy task. In the resistance of pain to verbal, narrative expression, [8] the visual artist turns to the tools and strategies at hand to build a composition around the depths of Christ's suffering. They turn to the recognisable instruments of torture and the gradations of pain written on the body through wounding and the contortion of limbs, through blood and facial anguish. In this way the image of the Passion blurs with the medieval reality of public torture and execution. But cinema offers the contemporary artist signification in movement and time. It enables an elaborate array of direct affect and impulse images (Deleuze, 1986) that are themselves corporeally rich. In both late medieval Passion art and Gibson's film, "in semiotic terms we are dealing with a special kind of language: a corporeal text or somatic sign that is 'read' by the viewer's body" (Biernoff, 2005: 44).

The prolonged violation of Jesus' body through the scourging works to establish his humanness for audiences, but also prolongs the anxiety and fear for the limits of his vulnerability. Like the late medieval art of the Passion, this visual violation, "always implicit in the very doctrine of incarnation, is re-enacted, rendered literal with a special imagination and vision, a special attention to pain and limit in its realisation" (Beckwith, 1993: 5). The body's absolute limit is very nearly reached in the scourging scene with the limp body dragged away carcass-like in the end. Following this the crown of thorns is gouged into Jesus' head and he appears with Pilate on the steps before the people. With hands bound, a red robe hanging over his shoulders, the crown of thorns, an eye almost closed over, red and purple from a blow to the head, and a blood striped torso cross hatched with the torn flesh, Jesus appears as the medieval "man of sorrows." This moment holds a clue to the affective experience that carries the film's empathic intentions. The intense aversiveness of the scourging and the subsequent vulnerability and humanness of the suffering body presented

before the unsympathetic crowd educes warmth and affection in relation to an implied moral order. The body, subject to evil, experiences the horrific effects and trauma of the implements of the Passion, and becomes in this way the conduit for an empathic audience's shared affection.

Crucifixion

The final apex of intensity builds with the bearing of the cross to the hill and the crucifixion, which presents the most detailed gradations of Jesus' suffering. The scene is drawn out, detailed in every step; perhaps less a "journey" than an extended series of bodily states presented at their limit points, the stumbling and falling, the gravity of the body dragged downward under the visible weight of the cross, and the deep penetration of the crown of thorns covering the face in blood. The purpose of the film becomes clear in the crucifixion. To remain unmoved is to remain outside an affective community, a community of affected viewers. Bonaventure's Franciscan provocation of those unaffected by the sight of the suffering Christ is amplified in this scene: "And you, lost man, the cause of all this confusion and sorrow, how is it that you do not break down and weep." [9]

When Jesus' body is laid down to be nailed to the cross, we see the large hammer raised abstractly into the air – a visual dislocation – and brought down onto the metal spike. The view is side-on, close to Jesus' bloody and agony ridden face. His hand is in the foreground of the image and the focus is on the spike held by the Roman soldier and driven deeply through the hand of Jesus into the wood. Close-ups of Jesus' face are cut into the scene to present the visible facial language of agony and exhaustion. Reflecting a myth that has carried through from the late middle ages, the second arm has to be stretched with rope to reach the hole designated for the second spike. [10] That arm seems to be suddenly dislocated, a bodily dislocation that punctuates the scene and emphasises the limits of bodily sensation as it extends those limits through to the end of the film.

Throughout the crucifixion scene camera angles switch between intimacy and distance; the image is both with Jesus, and steps back to allow us to take in the scene as witnesses around the foot of the cross and briefly from a "spiritual" position above. It has been noted that little is made of the resurrection within the film. There is little doubt that this is because it is subordinate to the sweeping and intensifying waves of aversive affect that are the proper substance of the film, and because those moments of violence are the most effective tools for achieving a shared empathic experience around those aversive affects.

Cinematic Strategies of *The Passion of the Christ*: A Composition of Violent Forces

The scenes described above are not isolated moments of violence but rather two peaks of intensity within a relentless depiction of Jesus' physical suffering. Throughout, narrative and figuration give way to corporeal experience, the aversive affect of suffering, the horror of torture, the sensation of pain, and the minutiae of Jesus' suffering in its full duration. Cinema enables something like a contemporary *imitatio Christi* with the potential to bring empathic viewers together on a global scale. Morgan notes that rather than placing the suffering of Jesus within the broader teachings of the Church, "the film isolates the punishment of Jesus' body, subordinating viewers to the film's protracted obsession with the intricacies of pain and violation" (Morgan, 2004: 90). Morgan sees this *subordination* of the viewer as a deliberate targeting of modern Catholicism. He sees Gibson using popular visual culture to achieve what religious orders like "Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ do behind the scenes: to

reestablish a rigidly authoritarian church in which penance, discipline, and unquestioning submission characterize a blind obedience to absolute authority" (Ibid., 2004: 91).

The cinematic strategies at play in *The Passion of the Christ* are not strictly authoritarian or ideological. They do not work by imposing belief upon audiences. Morgan's account ignores the film's widespread success, its interest across the broad array of Christian denominations as well as non-Christian viewers, and indeed the broader cultural significance of the viewing experience it establishes. The revival of the late medieval visual and affective strategies coheres with the contemporary evangelical embrace of popular cultural forms such as music, cinema, radio and television as a means of building faithful community membership and identification. And it enables a participatory experience of the film, helped by the use of online communication and networking technologies. But it broadens this outreach beyond evangelical audiences to more liberal Christians and non-religious cinemagoers alike. "Subordination" is not the right concept here. There is, rather, a great emphasis on the role of the viewer, the *work* a viewer must undertake to share in the experience of Jesus' suffering as salvific.

There is a synergy between the strategies of the medieval authors and artists of the Passion, and contemporary film. Gibson knows the affective potential of the suffering hero, the heightened attractiveness of the suffering heroic body, and the suffering hero's ability to unify a collective emotional force. One of his other widely popular forays into historical conflict, *Braveheart* (1995), with the eventual torture and unjust execution of its hero William Wallace, attests to this. Both the medieval texts and images and Gibson's film attempt to draw audiences into the moral order of the Church, to internalise that participation through a violent foundational image. They take seeing as an emotional, affective and devotional act of piety, a kind of powerful allegiance lived directly through the body.

Conclusion

The Passion of the Christ draws on the potential of cinema to seed a relatively unbound, unrestricted field of affects around the forces of violence brought against the body of Jesus. As with its medieval forbearers, in *The Passion of the Christ*, affect dominates over meaning or narrative. It shapes meaning; or rather, it is the primary intention of the film and signals its function. Intensity is the film's measured and metered currency, as it battles with the problem of rendering violent forces and painful sensation, with the goal of unifying or integrating a broad and somewhat diverse audience of devotees or ordinary movie-goers.

The film draws on the potential of the medium to move viewers, and Gibson clearly acknowledges his aim of providing a corporeally rich "devotional tool." [11] As a tool for disseminating salvific pain, cinema offers a far broader receptive audience than the late medieval devotional art and the feats of the mystics and ascetics could have hoped for. Even though the Passion no longer serves as a central image of contemporary Christian devotion, it enables here a powerfully empathic, shared viewing experience, the *sense* of seeing or witnessing a foundational bodily event.

Pedagogical intimacy and shared cultural experience are the goals, and sensation the means to achieve them. The body of Jesus as depicted in the medieval Passion texts "is not meant to be contemplated at a distance; instead we are invited to embrace it, in language which is physical, intense and reciprocal" (Bestul, 1996: 46). Likewise, Gibson's strategy in forging his film as devotional tool is to saturate it with the "experience" of pain and the full array of

its affective forces. It requires of audiences not to think, but to sense or to feel, and to enter into a relation with the ordeal of Jesus' torture and crucifixion. This is visual art as politic, a tool for connecting individuals at the level of ordeal to a community of belief and devotion that stretches well beyond the immediate context of the film's screening, at a time of global cultural uncertainty and instability.

Intimacy may be the best term to describe the ironic reversal of affects that emerge out of the vivid and sustained bodily suffering Jesus endures throughout the film, where repulsion is merged with affection. Any violence in an age of terrorism will be controversial, dangerous and powerful, as Grosz notes. Christ's suffering body, his pain, becomes the rallying point for audiences alongside a broader dichotomy of us and them, framed by Bush's slogans of a war on terror and evil. Indifference to this kind of visual violence is discouraged, and perhaps even, impossible. To attempt a critical stance against the film is to position oneself as hostile to its celebrated victim. While it utilizes and transforms the work of the late medieval Passion artists and authors, popular visual culture is also doing the theological work of John Paul II here. What the film offers as a visual event is a chance for a community of viewers to *feel* close to the (hurting) body of Jesus, and perhaps to experience that intimacy as not simply aversion, but rather affection or even renewed devotion.

Notes

[1] By September 30, 2005, only a year and a half after its release, it had grossed $370,270,943 in the US, placing it as the 10th highest grossing film there, and the 26th highest grossing film worldwide at US $604,370,943 (Internet Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com).

[2] See Anon., 2001.

[3] John Paul II draws on parts of the New Testament (Paul's gospel in particular), and the Old Testament (Isaiah, and the trials of Job), to provide a contemporary theological framework for "the Christian meaning of human suffering." He takes as his starting point the words of Paul: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col. 1:24). In this text he attempts to re-establish the link between Jesus' suffering, the Church, and the practices of the faithful: "Precisely by means of his Cross he must accomplish the work of salvation" (Section IV, 16).

[4] See Gibson's comments on the film's official website: www.thepassionofthechrist.com.

[5] For Kamerick (2002: 1), the proper and improper adoration of Christian images was a highly contentious and contested theological and political topic in that era: "Holy images never completely shook off the taint of idolatry in the Middle Ages."

[6] In its extreme, this form of devotional practice in late medieval Europe took on violent forms of self-flagellation, which Bynum sees as a means of access to the power structure of the Church for holy women. Often devotion took holy women into the extreme depths of physical pain: "Among the more bizarre manifestations were rolling in broken glass, jumping into ovens, hanging oneself from a gibbet, and praying while standing on one's head" (Bynum, 1996: 132).

[7] The theology engages a particular understanding of the seeing subject. In her study of medieval optics, Biernoff (2002: 95-6) explores Roger Bacon's 1266 *Opus Majus*, which describes the "physical interaction" between the sense organ and the object: "Fundamentally, for Bacon, sight is a change in the sensitive humours and membranes of the eye; and as such, it is accompanied by a certain amount of pain."

[8] On the inexpressibility of pain, see Elaine Scarry (1985).

[9] From the *Lignum Vitea*, cited in Merback (1999: 245); see also Despres (1989).

[10] Groebner (2004: 101) sees this image in painting and practice in medieval passion plays as "an allusion to the fifteenth century torture of stretching, in which the miscreant was pulled apart with ropes during interrogation."

[11] See Gibson's comments on the film's official website, <http://www.thepassionofthechrist.com>, accessed June 2007.

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