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# An Evil Threat to Marriage, Children and the Future: Queer Theory, "The Passion of the Christ," and Evangelical Political Rhetoric

## **Abstract**

This article employs queer theory to analyze Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) for its portrayal of queer characters (Satan and Herod) in contrast with non-queer (Pilate and Claudia, Seraphia, Simon the Cyrene, and Mary, Christ's mother), and how it depicts the former as evil and the latter as good. In particular, these contrasts involve self-indulgent or predatory sexual expression versus a healthy marital relationship, and evil versus loving influences over children, who represent hope for the future. Finally, the article looks at the film's heavy marketing to American evangelicals and how the symbolic representations in the film relate to evangelical politics and rhetoric concerning contemporaneous queer issues – gay marriage debates in particular.

## **Keywords**

queer theory, Mel Gibson, Passion of the Christ, gender studies, marriage, children, evangelical, rhetoric

## **Author Notes**

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Since its release, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) has proven to be as commercially successful as it has been controversial. Given its use of ancient languages, controversial subject matter and lack of high-profile stars, what began as a Holy Week release with an uncertain future turned into a surprise blockbuster sensation. Citing these very challenges, New York Times columnist Frank Rich wrote in advance of the film's release, "it's hard to imagine the movie being anything other than a flop in America."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the film broke opening day records and, building on that momentum, went on to become 2004's highest-grossing film world-wide, making over \$608 million. Further, it became the all-time highest grossing R-rated film, and its DVD sales have continued to contribute to its financial and popular success.<sup>2</sup> Anticipating one of the most prominent controversies surrounding the film, Rich reported on Gibson's response to being asked about whether the film's portrayal of Jewish people might offend some. The director responded, saying, "It may. It's not meant to. I think it's meant to just tell the truth. . . . Anybody who transgresses has to look at their own part or look at their own culpability." Since that time, many have indeed examined *Passion* for what they see as problematic portrayals and the particular "truth" it depicts.

Looking back on the tenth anniversary of its release, the quantity and range of critical responses to Gibson's landmark film is remarkable. Debated in the media, as well as by religious leaders, the film sparked intense popular interest. Although it has been praised for its cinematography and spiritual impact on many viewers, it has also been criticized for its excessive violence, historical inaccuracies and portrayal of Jewish people. Further, the film has been the subject of numerous journal articles (Crawford, 2004; Cunningham, 2004; Flannery-Dailey, 2004; Hamm, 2004; Lawler, 2004; Madden, 2004; Mork, 2004; Paawlikowski, 2004; Reinhartz, 2004; Sandmel, 2004; Silk, 2004;

Cooper, 2005; Moore, 2005; Astell, 2006, Brown & Lindvall, 2007, Gonshak, 2008; Maddux, 2008; Lundberg, 2009; Trammell, 2010; Gunn, 2012) and academic books (Corley & Webb, 2004; Gracia, 2004; Plate, 2004; Beal & Linafelt, 2005, Garber, 2006; Beal & Linafelt, 2006). The array of scholarly reflections on the movie and its impact is impressive. At the forefront of these academic reflections are critical considerations of *The Passions*' anti-Semitism (Corley & Webb, 2004; Gracia, 2004; Flannery-Dailey, 2004; Hamm, 2004; Mork, 2004; Paawlikowski, 2004; Plate, 2004; Reinhartz, 2004; Sandmel, 2004; Beal & Linafelt, 2005; Cooper, 2005; Garber, 2006; Gonshak, 2008).

Yet, given the prominence of Satan as one of the film's most artistically drawn characters – as an androgynous, gender-bending figure – one relevant theoretical perspective pertinent to critical examinations of the film is the contribution of queer theory to analyze its portrayal of queer people. This is particularly so given the film's contrast of Satan with traditionally gendered or explicitly heterosexual characters, whose depictions likewise involve significant artistic license, and who are represented as good, even "holy." These contrasts involve not only structural comparisons between these characters as bad versus good, but also contrasts regarding issues of queer identity and politics relevant to the era in which the film was released – most prominently, marriage and childrearing.

This paper will use the perspective of queer theory to contrast Satan's depiction – a "queer" figure identified as pure evil – with other characters portrayed as heterosexual or "normal," and "good," examining the cinematic and narrative means used to create these contrasts. Further, it will contextualize this depiction within the culture wars of the period when the film was released, examining how the dualisms in the film between queer and non-queer characters construct queerness as an "enemy" to be fought. This

queer enemy presents a dangerous influence on society's future, one that would replace "traditional" marriage as a steadying force in society with a selfish, self-indulgent sexuality – one that presents a threat not only to the rearing of healthy children, but also to the future itself. Finally, the paper will show how Gibson's symbolic depictions appealed to conservative evangelicals, to whom this film was heavily marketed, in terms relevant to contemporaneous conservative politics and public policy initiatives.

### **Satan as Queer Predator and Threat to the Traditional Family and Children**

Among the approaches advanced by queer theory is to examine the way in which traditional binary gender/sexual axes are decoupled... that is, how "queer" (that which is against the norm) is established *as* queer. As Jargose writes, it analyzes that which "[dramatizes] incoherencies in the alleged stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire"; further, although queer theory may be most prominently associated with lesbian and gay subjects, nonetheless, "its analytical framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, [and] gender ambiguity."<sup>3</sup> Thus, queer theory's subject matter encompasses a range of discursively constructed identities, to include "various types of gender-bending" as likewise constitutive of "the queer."<sup>4</sup> Hence, queer theory, in part, focuses on exposing cultural practices that construct persons whose gender/sexual identity establish them as what Doty calls "binary outlaws,"<sup>5</sup> vis-à-vis those whose identities and practices are constructed as normal – that is (excusing the sexist language to employ a cultural expression) those who may be called the "good guys" in binary terms.

Germane to an analysis of Gibson's *Passion* is not only investigation of the depiction of queer characters, but also the film's juxtaposing of these with non-queer, "normal," traditionally gendered characters in a hierarchical signifying scheme. Hence, whereas in some representational politics the appearance of the queer may radically challenge traditional binary discursive practices, other appearances may buttress such practices, as Sullivan notes when writing that:

the term queer can be used to reinforce, rather than deconstruct, the ways in which identity and difference are constructed in terms of binary oppositions, of us and them – oppositions which are never neutral but are always hierarchical. The queer subject of this kind of discourse reaffirms his or her identity in opposition to the supposedly normative other...<sup>6</sup>

Sullivan then quotes Halperin to note that "particular uses of the term queer can even [...] 'support that restigmatization'" of queer subjects.<sup>7</sup> Hence in *Passion*, the gender-ambiguous figure of Satan, a character symbolizing evil, is intended to reinforce rather than challenge the interpretation of queer identities as transgressively "wrong," particularly when juxtaposed with carefully constructed traditionally gendered and sexualized "good" characters who are presented as heroes and heroines, such as Pilate, his wife Claudia, Simon the Cyrene, and Seraphia (a character known in tradition as Veronica).

Satan first appears in the opening minutes of the film, making one of only a handful of appearances. As John Bartunek explains in *Inside the Passion: An Insider's Look at The Passion of the Christ* (2005) – a companion book and study guide to the film based on the author's interviews with Gibson and others, as well as observations made during the film's production – the filmmakers considered including more appearances by Satan, but ultimately "opted out of so blatant a satanic presence, not for theological reasons, but for artistic ones." He continues, noting that the intent was to keep the film as

“real” as possible, and that it “had to show that the Devil was involved, because he (sic) was, but it had to avoid overdoing it so that it becomes hokey.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, after a scene showing Christ distressed and praying in the garden of Gethsemane, and another showing Judas receiving payment from the Sanhedrin to betray Christ, the film returns to the garden for our first encounter with Satan.

The eerie *mise-en-scène* is established by the foggy night, illuminated in blue by a full moon. Having seen Christ praying alone, we are startled to notice the outline of a robed figure lurking behind him, out of focus, staring at him from the bushes. We then cut to a close up on the figure’s face, which we intuitively know is Satan’s. The gender ambiguity is startling. Beyond the shaved head and eye brows, and body-hiding dark robe, Satan’s face bears light-colored makeup to obscure gender-revealing facial contours; the look is similar to that made famous by gender-bending rock star David Bowie, in his androgynous Ziggy Stardust persona. Against expectations, Satan is played by a woman (Rosalinda Celentano), but with a voice dubbed by a man. A first impression of this character is uncertainty as to “its” gender. Satan looks directly into the camera when s/he observes and addresses Christ from a slight distance. This hard gaze, made into the camera and thereby directly at the viewer, is a technique used in horror films to induce uneasiness, as the audience itself is made the object of the cinematic gaze. The edginess is accentuated by a slow-motion camera technique that reveals no blinking, making the figure’s appearance and gaze even more unsettling, as it never wavers. The figure is beautiful, disturbing, seductive and predatory. It establishes what Bartunek says was an intentional motif running throughout the film, that “evil is a distortion of something good. [...] It is weird, it is shocking.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, this gender ambiguous “queer” character is established as the embodiment of pure evil. Satan speaks to Christ in *vox*

*masculine*, giving voice to doubts intended to plague Jesus; Christ in response prays to God for strength and perseverance from this, as Bartunek describes it, “weird,” “shocking,” “evil” figure’s psychological onslaught.

What follows becomes more physical but no less psychological. After cross-cutting between the two characters, showing Satan lurking in the shadows beside a tree and leering at the solitary, vulnerable Jesus (who seems unaware of the lurker’s gaze), a shot begins on Satan’s face and slowly pedestals down over his/her entire body, past the figure’s robe-obscured pelvis, and comes to rest at the garment’s bottom hem. From under Satan’s garment, out crawls a serpent. The snake reveals itself more and more, pointing directly towards Christ, lengthening as it emerges from under the robe. It finally dares to touch Christ’s body. After a moment, Christ’s response is to summarily stomp on the serpent’s head, killing it. The religious symbolism of the moment is that Christ overcomes temptation, the new Adam more successful where his Garden of Eden predecessor failed. Also intending to show the fulfillment of ancient prophecy (Genesis 3:14-15, about the snake’s curse and how one day “he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” [NRSV]), the image nonetheless bears Freudian implications, as the phallic snake, issuing from beneath the sultry-eyed, stalking Satan’s robe, “tempts” Christ with homosexual contact. Christ himself summarily “kills” the temptation in swift, indignant fashion. Indeed, the strength of this reading is revealed in Bartunek’s description of the scene, as he writes that the snake slithers “seductively” towards Jesus, attempting to “penetrate” his world.<sup>10</sup> The queerness here thus extends beyond the androgyny of the figure to include a predatory, symbolic queer sexual encounter with the evil figure – one initiated by Satan and rejected by Christ outright, and which establishes Satan, the gender bending character, as what one analyst commenting on this scene

describes as “the animal opposite to divine, cultural aspirations,” who is rejected by means of the “power of sexual selection in human evolution.”<sup>11</sup>

Having in this encounter established Satan as a “cosmic villain” playing antagonist to Christ as a “warrior hero,”<sup>12</sup> Satan next appears in brief glimpses among a group of children who taunt Judas on a hillside outside town, psychologically tormenting Christ’s betrayer until he hangs himself from a tree. Significantly, two such children had previously transformed into demons as they cornered Judas in town at night, Judas calling them “little Satans,”<sup>13</sup> just *before* they become deformed and demonic, and attack him while hurling psychological taunts (similar to Satan’s verbal tormenting of Jesus in the garden). That these children are Jewish, indicated by the kippot worn on their heads,<sup>14</sup> ties the film’s well-established anti-Semitism with its devilish depiction of the queer, as these and later-seen Jewish children come under the evil influence of queer Satan.

A bunch of Jewish children later chase a distraught Judas in the desert. The images are frenzied, showing the children pushing, tackling and spitting on Judas, while also yelling insults. Twice in their midst, Satan appears. Clearly influencing the children and their disturbing behavior, the hooded figure parts its lips, revealing skeletal-looking teeth, similar to the caricaturishly poor teeth of the Jewish children. At one point, the predators vanish, and Judas is left alone to contemplate suicide. Although the sudden disappearance of the children from the scene suggests that the torment may have been in Judas’ mind, having Satan appear in the children’s midst suggests otherwise, as Judas would had to have imagined the self same Satanic figure that previously appeared before Jesus. This further establishes Satan’s prowling, predatory and death-dealing disposition, characteristics which make his/her evil influence over children all the more unsettling.

One of the most cinematically powerful images in the film follows later, as Satan next appears lurking in the crowd at Christ's flogging. During this segment, the one most often criticized for its excessive violence, Satan turns up amidst an otherwise motionless crowd, gliding unnoticed past them, circling Christ. Satan's eyes are intently focused on Christ and the scourging. At one point, it becomes clear that Satan is holding something in her/his arms, as yet unrevealed. As the viewer becomes curious, a figure in Satan's grasp stirs. Drawing back the robe, Satan reveals the sinister face of a middle-aged, grinning demonic baby, which itself gazes into the camera. The image is jolting. Here, Satan's queerness is further accentuated by her/his unnatural baby. Particularly since this image follows back-and-forth cuts between Jesus and traditionally gendered Mary, Christ's mother, the image reads as a scornful, mocking Madonna and child, and contrasts a "good," healthy mother-son relationship with one that is queer and "evil." Gibson's intent in showing this "deformed and hairy baby with a ghoulish grin" was, in his words, to depict "evil distorting what is good."<sup>15</sup> Bartunek's writing in the *Insider's Guide* reflects this, as the discussion of this moment regularly links that which is unconventional with "evil," saying for example that the image is "more than a little weird," "it's all wrong," "[it] is weird, it is shocking," "[it's] disturbing," and "reiterates the idea that evil [... is a] distortion of something good."<sup>16</sup>

If, as Judith Butler and others argue, gender is something performed,<sup>17</sup> and that cultures have a stake in perpetuating a system wherein traditional gender behavior is procured and rewarded, particularly by those rearing children, then those whose gender identity lies outside the norm must be subject to scorn, taboo and culturally sanctioned punishment. Thus Butler argues:

To guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements, well-established in the anthropological literature of kinship, have instated sexual

reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system. As Foucault and others have pointed out, the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural "attraction" to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, traditionally gendered parents rearing children is good, because this arrangement is likely to continue the cultural construction of the sex-gender axis as "normal." The very possibility that a queer parent may rear a queer child, and alter that norm-producing cycle (what we'll later relate to Lee Edelman's "reproductive futurism"), is a threat cultures must harness and control by making this "option" seem unnatural, a threat to normal society. Here, in *Passion*'s mock Madonna and child, is a potent expression of that fear – of what may come of queer parenting – particularly when juxtaposed with exemplars of "good" traditionally gendered characters, and especially those raising children, such as Simon and Seraphia (discussion of which is forthcoming).

Satan's final appearances come, first, as Christ carries the cross along the *Via Dolorosa*, and, finally, just subsequent to Christ's death on the cross. In the first, along the city street leading to Golgotha, Satan appears amidst the crowds, eyes intently – even seductively – fixed on Mary, Christ's mother. Mary, meanwhile, walks in parallel action on the other side of the road, mirroring the movements of Satan. Mary initiates the visual exchange, suddenly fixing her eyes on an object in the distance, as she looks directly at the camera. The crosscut reveals Satan returning the gaze, the eyeline match suggesting his/her focus is on Mary, as Satan likewise looks into the camera. The crosscuts between them continue, as the figures gaze at each other. Finally, Mary's attention returns to her son, and she breaks the mutual stare. While both gazes are strong and direct, Satan's look is most menacing, predatory and seductive, whereas Mary's expresses more

concern. The juxtaposition between them establishes a cinematic binary, between the good mother and the evil figure.<sup>19</sup> This exacerbates the contrast between them established earlier by Satan's derisive posing as an evil Madonna with child. To make the juxtaposition even more clear, following this exchange between Satan and Mary is a depiction of Mary running to her son when he falls while carrying the cross. This occasions a subjective flashback to a similar event in Jesus' childhood when, upon seeing her youthful son fallen, Mary runs to him, embracing him tenderly as the two share a loving look, resulting in a traditional image of Madonna and child. Notably, Mary holds her son in the opposite arm with which Satan held her/his demon child, establishing the latter Madonna and child as a contrasting mirror image to the previous one.

Satan's last appearance is again an inverse of a previous shot. After Christ's death, we see Satan on his/her knees, writhing in agony, ripping his/her robes off, revealing a completely shaved head, which again obscures gender identity. S/he screams, as the camera cranes up, showing Satan alone in a sepia-toned, rock-laden circular field. With Christ's passing, death – the consequence for Adam and Eve having disobeyed God and listened to Satan – is overcome. Now, Satan is isolated and tormented; de-hooded, we see the full extent of her/his androgyny and gender nonconformity. This shot is in contrast to one from God's point of view at the moment of Christ's death, where a high overhead camera shows the blue-toned rock-laden circular field atop Golgotha. From here, a raindrop, or God's tear, forms and descends from that height, hitting the ground with such force that it starts an earthquake. Gibson's cinematic message here plays off of the well-known Biblical reference: God, the Father, so loved the world that He gave His only son, for whom He had so much love that He shed tears upon the earth at Christ's death. Juxtaposed with the subsequent inverse shot of Satan, this love is contrasted with

Satan's hatred for humanity and its future. This further establishes the film's contrasts. Ultimately, the good, the holy, has defeated the bad, the purely evil, embodied in gender bending, predatory, child-endangering queer personage.

### ***Passion's* Positive Exemplars of Marriage and Childrearing**

Several characters likewise given to distinctive emphasis in Gibson's film provide a contrast to the depiction of Satan. To begin, Pilate and his wife Claudia not only model traditional gender roles but also do so in an explicitly heterosexual, healthy relationship. Indeed, the film's depiction of these two provides one of its few instances of true character development, which is lacking for many of even the most prominent characters; this development gives audience members "a reason to care" about Pilate and Claudia.<sup>20</sup> That Gibson also uses "poetic license with abandon"<sup>21</sup> in drawing these characters makes their portrayals all the more intentional and subject to scrutiny. Claudia, soft and beautiful, remains behind the scenes publicly (as a good wife "should"), even as she shares silent exchanges with her powerful, handsome, authority-wielding husband while he makes public appearances and judgments. It is she who asks her husband to show mercy on Jesus, and Pilate's apparent respect and devotion to his wife lead him to try to be the good husband-provider and give her what she wants. In public, their affection is shown by eye contact, Claudia in a window, Pilate presiding at forum; behind the scenes, we see moments of tenderness, as the two lovingly touch each other while discussing Jesus and his fate.

While their relationship is affecting, the tender sentimentality of it is an artistic construction – one likely out-of-step with historical reality, as marital relations of the era

had more to do with economics and politics than romance.<sup>22</sup> While ancient Roman marriages could involve affection, the focus was nonetheless on satisfying the man's needs, for in marriage (as elsewhere) the goal was to establish the man's dominance, the wife subjugating herself as a subordinate.<sup>23</sup> The conception of marriage as a relationship based on love and mutuality, as opposed to an economic and political institution, is modern.<sup>24</sup> In this context, while the sentimental romance depicted between Pilate and Claudia is moving, it is nonetheless a construction, one which imposes modern-day ideals about marriage onto a relationship which, given the era depicted, would have been more pragmatic, and certainly would have been more based upon the wife's efforts to please her husband, rather than vice versa. Here, Gibson imposes a modern-day ideal of the loving, heterosexual marriage onto the depiction of an ancient couple, and in so doing creates a cinematic fantasy through which to idolize the good, pure heterosexual marriage, using this ancient couple to express a modern day model. Ironically, ancient Roman society believed that only in same-sex friendships between men could true loyalty and egalitarianism exist, even though today this is the dominant (heterosexual) marital ideal.<sup>25</sup>

In *Passion*, Claudia is portrayed as a "kind of heroine," working behind the scenes to save Christ by influencing her husband, who tries to please her; her defining scene finds her sympathetically, even modestly, presenting Mary with pure white linens, with which Jesus' mother blots up Christ's sacred blood after the flogging – this, despite historians' doubts that an exchange of this kind might even be possible between Jewish and Roman women.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, historians accuse Gibson of distorting Pilate's character, "making him seem to be a tolerant, benevolent, fair-minded judge," as opposed to the "mean-spirited political opportunist" known to history.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the film parts with

historical accuracy to portray this couple as sympathetic and heroic, one with which modern-day audiences may identify and to which they should aspire. Indeed, Pilate's countenance throughout reveals a man trying to find a way to free Christ in order to please his wife, but frustrated at every turn by the manipulative Sanhedrin. Perhaps this is why Gibson, in an ABC-TV interview, referred to Pilate as "monstrous," clearly at odds with how Pilate is read by most critics; Pilate, struggling to do the "right" thing, as he promised his wife, is monstrous for succumbing to the manipulations of the "evil" Jews in their expression of Satan's will. Cinematically presented as a would-be hero, and fittingly often shot from the respectful low-angle, Pilate is, even so, unable to save Christ from what is ultimately portrayed as Satan's behind-the-scenes orchestration of the grim events leading to the crucifixion. In sum, Pilate fails by acquiescing to the desires of the androgynous, queer Satan, and not honoring those of his pure, traditionally gendered wife.

Notably, Christ's encounters with Pilate, the traditionally gendered, explicitly heterosexual man, are in stark contrast with those he has with another character, Herod. When Christ is sent to the Galilean ruler, the viewer meets an effeminate, overweight, prissy man wearing mascara, holding his hand by his face, fingers upraised, and presiding over a drunken orgy. One critic characterizes Herod's portrayal as that of a "vulgar transvestite," a "repugnant sexual deviant."<sup>28</sup> Bartunek writes in the *Insider's Guide* that Herod is "extremely effeminate," "decadent," and lives a life devoted to "extravagant self-indulgence," and the pursuit of "sexual pleasures."<sup>29</sup> Here we have a figure tied to a long history of cinematic depictions of queerness, whose particular style of gender nonconformity makes him what film historians have termed a "sissy"<sup>30</sup> or "pansy."<sup>31</sup> Further, Herod's lifestyle is focused on satisfying pleasures of the moment, not shoring

up the future, and is certainly in contrast to the traditional, mutually supportive, lovingly affectionate relationship between Pilate and Claudia. Noting that Pilate and Herod are portrayed as leading “contrasting ways of life,” Bartunek points out that when Jesus meets with Pilate, Christ in fact speaks with him, because Christ “saw in Pilate a glimmer of honor,” whereas with Herod, “Jesus stays utterly silent.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as if the spectacle is too much for him to acknowledge, Christ even avoids eye contact with the self-indulgent, queer Galilean ruler. The contrast of Herod and Pilate thus further emphasizes the film’s contrast of the “normal” and the “queer,” here, the first figure being honorable and due respect, the other not.

Two other characters given distinctive portrayals in the film further support this contrast; these are Simon the Cyrene, who helps carry Christ’s cross, and Seraphia, known more traditionally as Saint Veronica, who wipes the Golgotha-bound Christ’s forehead with her veil. These two are depicted as the hero and heroine of the *Via Dolorosa*. In fact, we are introduced to them in close proximity, within about one minute in the film. Both Seraphia and Simon embody traditional gender behaviors, and both are very specifically introduced as to depict them as not only parents, but also good and respectable ones. Their healthy care for children is in stark contrast to that of Satan’s evil influence. Hence, when we meet Seraphia, fetching water and listening with concern to the sounds of the crowd on the street, she is comforting a crying girl, holding the youngster in her arms and saying, “Don’t fret, my daughter. Don’t fret.” Similarly, when we are introduced to Simon, he is holding hands with a small boy; when these two see Christ, scourged and lying exhausted on the dirt road, the boy cries, “Papa! Papa!,” whereupon Simon shields his distressed son’s eyes with his hand and begins to walk him quickly away. When the Romans compel Simon to carry Christ’s cross, the father tells

the boy, safely in the embrace of a woman who implored Simon to help Christ, that he should stay with her and await his return.<sup>33</sup>

Seraphia's moment transpires faster than Simon's, but is given such distinct cinematography as to be nonetheless uniquely memorable. Watching Christ from a distance, she sees him fall. As the Roman soldiers forcibly push back the crowd around Jesus, the scene proceeds, emphasizing a private, apocryphal moment between Seraphia and Christ. The sound of the crowds and soldiers becomes muted, as a soft musical interlude rises. Accompanying the auditory shift is a visual one into slow motion, as the heroine looks sympathetically upon and approaches Jesus. The effect is to "isolate" her from the violence and chaos around them; indeed, the lighting heightens her goodness, bestowing upon her hair something of a halo when she removes her veil.<sup>34</sup> The audience's identification with her is accentuated by point of view shots, which place the viewer in her perspective as she nears the fallen savior. The crowds and soldiers seem to part mystically as she passes them to kneel before Christ and offer him her veil with which to wipe his face. The heroism of her act is established when a Roman soldier confronts her for daring to approach the prisoner, as the sound of the crowd suddenly rises, and a percussive thump reintroduces a more aggressive orchestration. Her moment, memorable and consequential, is over.

At this, the heroism is handed to Simon, who, upon seeing the crowds kicking and spitting at Jesus while the Roman soldiers look on laughing, takes pity on Christ and responds to the pleas of nearby women for someone to stop the abuse. Showing strength and courage, Simon yells for the crowds to stop; indeed, his cry even silences the musical score. The viewer hears and sees only his righteous outrage as he confronts the indifferent, heavily armored soldiers who vastly outnumber him. Low angle shots as he

scolds the Romans, refusing to carry the cross if they don't stop the torment, afford him authority and respect, just as the cutting between him alone and the group of soldiers emphasizes that his confrontation is one against many. Showing selflessness, he ends his tirade, saying, "I don't care what happens to me!" As the hero carries the cross with Jesus, we cut to the heroine, Seraphia, emotionally looking on, pensive music accompanying the image. On a subsequent fall, Simon helps Christ up, encouraging him by observing that their journey is almost done; and when they reach Golgotha, Christ quietly gives Simon an intense, appreciative exchange of eye contact, before the Romans force the brave Cyrene to depart.

Hence, among the characters Gibson gives artistically drawn portrayals, he creates a distinct line between the queer and the "normal." Between Satan and Herod, we find the queer portrayed as predatory, promiscuous, dishonorable, self-indulgent in sins of the flesh (be those sexual or violent), a threat to children, an enemy to be fought, and, ultimately, evil. In comparison, those who embody traditional gender identity – Pilate and Claudia, Simon and Seraphia, and even Mary – are variously portrayed as brave, heroic, honorable, virtuous, family-loving, good parents, holy and good. In *Passion's* binary presentation of the normal and queer, a clear hierarchy is established via cinematic and narrative means, affording the former, with whom the audience is encouraged to identify, sympathetic depiction, while representing the latter as eccentric, detestable and evil. As noted, part of the contrasts involves their sexual expression (extramarital, predatory and self-indulgent, versus matrimonial and loving) and influence on children (luring them to evil, versus nurturing them with familial love).

## Marketing Strategies, Contemporaneous Politics and Evangelical Rhetoric

The film's contrasts between the queer and the normal, and how these are expressed relative to sexual relationships and influences on children ("our future"), played into both the movie's marketing strategy and the politics of the era, as the film was heavily marketed to conservative American evangelicals. In a manner that one analyst called "unprecedented," the promotional "media blitz" for the movie ranged from sending "promotional DVDs designed for airing during Sunday worship services, to proselytizing material featuring stills from the film, to Web sites addressing the movie's appeal to evangelical believers"; beyond this, the producers "solicited support from the better-respected evangelical leaders, promoted the actor's and producers' religious beliefs, and framed the film as a tool that evangelicals could use to spread the Gospel."<sup>35</sup> Gibson himself reached out to religious leaders, expressing his "commitment to the Christian faith" and seeking their support; these leaders included: Pope John Paul II; conservative religious broadcaster and one-time presidential candidate, Pat Robertson; the founder of the "faith based" conservative advocacy group Focus on the Family, James Dobson, as well as that organization's president, Don Hodel; author of the influential evangelical booklet *The Four Spiritual Laws* (1952) and founder of the evangelical Campus Crusade for Christ, Bill Bright; and popular evangelist Billy Graham.<sup>36</sup> Gibson also conducted interviews with the conservative Catholic television station EWTN. The marketing appeals stressed that the film was historically accurate, a resource for proselytizing, and an authentic expression of its creator's devout faith.<sup>37</sup>

In relation to this last area, Gibson himself employed the rhetoric of spiritual warfare in discussing the film's production and distribution. Describing the process of

creating the movie, Gibson said, "The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, I was just directing traffic,"<sup>38</sup> and further, that working on the film "turned up the heat" on his prayer life.<sup>39</sup> He attributed his introduction to the writings of Anne Catherine Emmerich, which served as inspiration and source material for many of the scenes in the film, as "a series of divine coincidences."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Gibson even "framed the production experience as the frontline in the battle between the believers who created the movie and the demons that purportedly tried to impede its progress and success."<sup>41</sup> Thus, he spoke of challenges arising during production whenever the cast and crew were at pivotal moments, depicting these in terms of a broader spiritual battle, saying, "That's the big picture, isn't it? The big realms are slugging it out. We're just the meat in the sandwich."<sup>42</sup> On a DVD distributed to pastors, Gibson attributed actor Jim Caviezel's regular headaches on set to "something other worldly," and said that obstacles in production were similar to "poltergeist activity," and "I understand that it's the other realm... I believe that it is a very real thing and I've taken steps to wherever I can put on some armor."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the production of the film itself was, according to Gibson, the good battling the evil.

This battle, according to conservative media commentators, extended to responses to the film by leading figures in popular culture. Thus, part of the opposition came from an "anti-Christian media elite" (according to conservative radio host Laura Ingraham), who sought to "destroy" Mel Gibson (as claimed by TV host Bill O'Reilly) with "forces of censorship" on par with that of the Inquisition and Soviet Russia (as per conservative writer David Horowitz); thereby, as one academic critic notes, "Gibson and his supporters in the media and elsewhere succeeded in framing the discussion [of reaction to the film] as a culture war."<sup>44</sup> Hence, not only was the production of the film depicted as a

spiritual war, with Gibson and his cast and crew battling forces of evil to create the movie, but its critical reception was itself similarly involved in a culture war, one against Christianity in general, and conservative evangelicals in particular. This, in part, accounts for why evangelicals embraced the film, for not only did it “affirm evangelical values,” but also “generated a greater sense of community among them”; hence, in the United States, where “the decades-old battle over U.S. popular culture” by evangelicals “pushed the U.S. box office unusually high,” the film served as a “rallying cry,” and fed into the “oppositional politics that U.S. evangelicals and their liberal critics made of this film.”<sup>45</sup>

In a political era that centered on the religious right, and in which politicians courted evangelicals in particular, this marketing strategy and placement of the film within the context of “oppositional politics” and the culture wars is significant. The election year issues for 2004 included debates about the definition of marriage, as eleven states included ballot initiatives to amend their state’s constitution to restrict marriage to male-female partners. In such a context, when evangelicals were feeling victimized by a cultural agenda and engaged in a battle, *The Passion of the Christ* played into such a mindset. Hence, by framing opposition to Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* as representative of a broader cultural war on Christianity, evangelicals and other Christian conservatives saw in the film a worthy cause behind which to rally.<sup>46</sup> As Maddux has argued, the film invites identification with Jesus, who suffers and is mistreated for his religious beliefs; this portrayal invites even “white, middle-class North Americans to see themselves a victims”; thus, Maddux writes:

This discourse of oppression is a useful recourse for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian counterpolitics, especially as they set themselves at odds with the larger culture. The persecution complex that runs through 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian discourse – for example, complaints about the “war on Christians” – is only

emboldened by media texts like *The Passion* that construct Christians as an oppressed minority.<sup>47</sup>

It is in this light that the contemporaneous prominence of gay marriage as a political issue and the release of *The Passion of the Christ* achieve particular resonance.

*Passion's* juxtaposition of good, normal and/or heterosexual characters that embody traditional gender norms, with a queer character representing pure evil – one that even mocks the traditional family image with a horrific satire of Madonna and Child, manipulates children to do his/her will, and predatorily works behind the scenes to attack Christianity and impose an evil agenda – plays into these politics. Satan is portrayed not only as the ultimate signifier of “absolute evil,” but more basically as “the other” – the “inverse image” of what represents “God’s glory and goodness” – indeed, defined in “binary opposition” to this goodness and glory.<sup>48</sup> *Passion's* queer, evil figure, constructed in opposition to the pure goodness of its normal, selfless, even victimized characters, is a threat that good people must fight and overcome. This relates to right wing religious rhetoric of the election year, where the “evil” that Americans were told must be fought and overcome was embodied in gay marriage, emphasizing its threat to America’s families, children and, indeed, very future.

After 1996’s Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which permitted states to refuse recognition of marriage rights granted to gays and lesbians in other states, some states began to recognize same-sex marriages or rule that laws against such marriages were unconstitutional. Meanwhile, in response, other states proposed state constitutional amendments to ban same-sex marriage. The eleven state ballot initiatives to this effect in 2004, the year of *Passion's* release, helped mobilize conservative voters to come to the polls, and provided “crucial assistance to Republican candidates” seeking election, including President Bush.<sup>49</sup> Often drawing upon support from conservative religious

organizations to oppose such initiatives, the very language of “defense” used for DOMA constructed lesbian and gay Americans as “enemies” who threatened the pure and good heterosexual, or “normal,” understanding of marriage.<sup>50</sup> Considering that among the concerns of those who supported DOMA and the state constitutional amendments were “activist judges” ruling bans on same-sex marriage unconstitutional, *Passion*’s focus on judicial processes subject to corrupt influences and “unholy” outcomes is significant.

One of the implications of these threats to good, traditional marriage is the effect they and their queer supporters might have on children. This is where *Passion*’s regular focus on children comes into stark relief. Much of the political debates about “gay marriage” focused on its effect on children – that children need a mother and a father; that allowing same sex marriages would set a bad moral standard for children; that (recalling Butler’s arguments) this would allow gays and lesbians to recruit future “members,” threatening the reproduction of “normal” society; that all this might threaten the country’s future. Indeed, these concerns even extended to child molestation. This political rhetoric, particularly as employed by evangelicals, had been developed for decades, and was therefore highly influential to evangelicals’ thinking on these issues.

In this context it is worth considering the impact on such rhetoric of one of the most prominent leaders influencing evangelical discussion and thought on gay issues – the 1970’s “antihomosexual evangelist” Anita Bryant, whose focus on how these issues concern children continues to hold significance.<sup>51</sup> A beauty pageant winner and advertising spokesperson (in motherly persona) for the Florida Citrus Commission, Bryant was an outspoken critic of the “gay agenda.” Focusing on the threat of the “gay male predator,” Bryant’s public rhetoric partly concerned recruitment of the young into “the gay lifestyle,” and partly the threat homosexuals posed to the nation’s families and

future.<sup>52</sup> Speaking about the threat posed by homosexuals to America's children, Bryant spoke of such personage as "the enemy." Further, using rhetoric that has influenced the continued perception and portrayal of homosexuals to evangelicals and others, homosexuals are (according to Bryant) "antisocial," "abnormal, aberrant, irresponsible, rebellious, deviant, abominable, guilty of gross moral perversion, unnatural, and ungodly."<sup>53</sup> How apt a description of *Passion's* portrayal of Herod and Satan! That her rhetoric included the "language of malnutrition," and how gay men's "sick" influence could affect children's growing bodies,<sup>54</sup> even calls to mind the deformed child Satan holds in *Passion*, as evidence of what comes from queer parenting.

Bryant's rhetoric is but one, albeit important example of how evangelical discourse about the influence of political issues concerning gays and lesbians has influenced the depiction of gay and lesbian people, particularly among conservative Christians. Yet the history of how Satan is portrayed also bears relevance. Increasingly, Satan has been depicted in the news and media as an abuser of children – an increase which social critic James Kincaid notes corresponds nicely with American's increased belief in the Devil, which he proposes accounts for that rise.<sup>55</sup> Tying Americans' increased belief in Satan and the related concerns of child abuse with societal depictions of queers (themselves already latent with associations with evil and the mistreatment of children) leads to a potent cultural resonance, on which Gibson's film draws.

By fetishizing the Child,<sup>56</sup> right wing politics finds a powerful symbolic focus. The focus is on the need to protect the Child and its innocence, particularly within the confines of the traditional marital family, in order to insure the nation's future. How this rhetoric continues to connect with discussions of marriage and queers is attested to by a book published just the year prior to *Passion's* release – Alan Sears and Greg Osten's

*The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today* (2003). Arguing that any threat to “God’s plan for marriage and the family” is a threat to the “well-being of future generations,” and that the family is God’s *sine qua non* institution for “raising and nurturing children,” the authors construct queers as a threat to God’s intent and the very future.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, they note that the best time to reach out to people to make “a personal decision to believe in Christ” is when they are children, and that not coincidentally this is also when children are “susceptible to homosexual indoctrination” – a statement which constructs a battle for children’s souls being waged by the godly against the queer.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, queer Satan’s evil influence over children in *Passion* (be those the Jewish children s/he possesses, or the child Satan holds in his/her arms) tangibly illustrates the frightful implications of losing this all-important battle.

How this symbolism of the child relates to discussions of the future is the central concern of queer theorist Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Therein, he argues that children have been fetishized such that “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust.”<sup>59</sup> In political terms, this means that, “as the radical right maintains, the battle against queers is a life-and-death struggle for the future of the Child.”<sup>60</sup> Edelman’s work draws connections between the concern for the Child in the symbolic world of literature and movies (as the lynchpin of a meaningful future) and the political realm. Any threat to the Child and the protection of its innocence is a threat to the future. Indeed, as Edelman notes, concern with protecting the wellbeing of the Child is a particularly potent totem for politicians because violence done to the Child (“our future”) involves nothing short of a death drive. This death drive would mean not only an end to life as we know it (reproduced literally and ideologically from generation to

generation), but also more broadly “the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence.”<sup>61</sup>

This bears directly on the focus on children in *Passion*. Here, we find exemplars of “normal,” decent characters and their care for children (and, to be sure, care for the future by means of their helping Christ, the bringer of salvation), juxtaposed with queer characters like Herod, who lives only for himself and his present desires, and Satan, who literally seeks the destruction of childhood innocence and the world itself – indeed, who literally embodies the death drive, and wishes to bring death to the very world. Both characters in their own way threaten the reproduction of the “normal” social order into the future. In the end, for his/her inhumanity and transgressions (against goodness, the Holy, the Child, the future), queer Satan merits no compassion – only cinematic rejoicing at his/her damnation and eternal torment.<sup>62</sup> Just as protecting children was the focus of “gay marriage” debates, so we find the same concerns expressed allegorically in the film, where queer personage is positioned as the “enemy,” a threat to be combated, against whom to mount a “defense” – for the sake of children, and the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Rich, “Mel Gibson’s Martyrdom Complex,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/03/movies/mel-gibson-s-martyrdom-complex.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Beal and Tod Linafelt, “Introduction” to *Mel Gibson’s Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and The Passion of the Christ* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Annamarie Jargose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Harry M. Bernshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press), xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 45.

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<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, 45, quoting David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 65.

<sup>8</sup> John Bartunek, *Inside the Passion: An Insider's Look at The Passion of the Christ* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Ascension Press, 2005), 94-95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Pizzato, *Inner Theatres of Good and Bad: The Mind's Staging of Gods, Angels and Devils* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), 220.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>13</sup> Gibson here is likely referencing John 8:44, in which Jesus, in dialogue with Jewish people, says they are children of Satan.

<sup>14</sup> As the kippa was not typical Jewish male headwear worn at the time depicted, Gibson's use of this anachronism to emphasize the Jewish identity of these children is noteworthy.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Allan Powell, "Satan and the Demons," in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (New York: Continuum, 2004), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Bartunek, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 524.

<sup>19</sup> Kristy Maddux, "Playing the Victim: Violence, Suffering and Feminine Submission in *The Passion of the Christ*," *Journal of Media and Religion* 7 (2008): 157.

<sup>20</sup> Jose Marquez, "Lights! Camera! Action!," in *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture and The Passion of the Christ*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 178.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Kurtz, "*The Passion of the Christ*: Do Jews and Christians See the Same Film?," in *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, the Controversy*, ed. Jorge J.E. Gracia (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 91.

<sup>22</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 26-27; and Coontz, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Coontz, 5-7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Kurtz, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>28</sup> Susannah Heschel, "Christ's Passion: Homoeroticism and the Origins of Christianity," in *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and The Passion of the Christ*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 103.

<sup>29</sup> Bartunek, 79, 81.

<sup>30</sup> Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 32.

<sup>31</sup> Benschhoff and Griffin, 24-28.

<sup>32</sup> Bartunek, 81.

<sup>33</sup> While neither is specifically constructed as heterosexual (that is, they are not shown with an "opposite sex" partner), most viewers will likely read these traditionally gendered parental characters this way – problematic though this may be.

<sup>34</sup> Cynthia Freeland, "The Women Who Loved Jesus: Suffering and the Traditional Feminine Role," in *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, the Controversy*, ed. Jorge J.E. Gracia (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 152.

<sup>35</sup> James Y. Trammell, "Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See the Passion of the Christ?: Marketing Movies to Evangelicals," *Journal of Media and Religion* 9 (2010): 21.

<sup>36</sup> William J. Brown, John D. Keeler and Terrence R. Lindvall "Audience Response to The Passion to the Christ," *Journal of Media and Religion* 6 (2007): 90, 93.

<sup>37</sup> Trammell: 23-26.

<sup>38</sup> Paula Fredriksen, "Med Mel: the Gospel According to Gibson," *New Republic*. July 28 & August 4, 2003, 25.

<sup>39</sup> David Neff, "Why Evangelicals are Cheering a Movie with Profoundly Catholic Sensibilities," *Christianity Today*, March, 2004, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>41</sup> Trammell: 25.

<sup>42</sup> Neff: 33.

<sup>43</sup> As quoted by Trammell: 25.

<sup>44</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "Mel Gibson, the Scribes, and the Pharisees," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 138, 147.

<sup>45</sup> Neal King, "Truth at Last: Evangelical Communities Embrace The Passion of the Christ," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 160.

<sup>46</sup> Lundberg: 392-393.

<sup>47</sup> Maddux: 167.

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- <sup>48</sup> Christian Lundberg, "Enjoying God's Death: the Passion of the Christ and the Practices of an Evangelical Public," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (November 2009): 405.
- <sup>49</sup> James Dao, "Same-sex Marriage Issue Key to Some G.O.P. Races," *New York Times*, November 4, 2004.
- <sup>50</sup> Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 138.
- <sup>51</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2011).
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 129, 136. As Jordan notes, the subtitle of one of her books is *The Survival of the Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality*.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>55</sup> James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 175-180.
- <sup>56</sup> This is a central concern of Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- <sup>57</sup> Alan Sears and Craig Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 90, 116.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>59</sup> Edelman, 11.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.
- <sup>62</sup> Here, adopting Edelman's prose (p. 109) regarding the fate of other queer characters.

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