A Bloodthirsty Salvation: Behind the Popular Polarized Reaction to Gibson's The Passion

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Abstract
Focusing on viewer response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, this article interrogates the process of viewers' absorption of the film's dominant atonement images, penal substitution, christus victor and sacrifice in order to more deeply understand just how these images operate in popular culture, how they influence values, practices and beliefs, and to question the social impact of the discourse of violence and redemptive dynamics imbedded in the religious images themselves.

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Called a "Rorschach test," what is most revelatory about *The Passion of the Christ* is the fascinating array of contradictory responses its dissemination has induced in the American religious/social/political landscape. Popular and professional response to the film has been voluminous and wildly conflictual. Digging beneath one's first impression of a deeply polarized reaction to the film, this article's approach to *The Passion* is to interrogate viewer response to more deeply to understand how American values, attitudes and practices are influenced by the absorption and integration of dominant Christian atonement metaphors in popular culture.

Judith Butler has described film as a "production of realness." The constituted subject in film is part of a project of mastery that compels and disrupts its own repetitions. I investigate the "realness norms" that are simultaneously legitimated and delegitimated in viewer response to *The Passion*, using two different "gazes" outlined by bell hooks with respect to film. For hooks, the "neutral gaze" will always be a white male gaze that passes off its own perspective as omniscient and presumes upon and enacts its own perspective as it were no perspective at all. In *The Passion*, the neutral gaze assumes three dominant atonement types put forth by the film, substitution, christus victor and sacrifice, as omniscient, beyond question and absolute. In contrast to the neutral gaze, hooks describes an "oppositional gaze" as a kind of looking against the grain, a site of
resistance to the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking. The "oppositional gaze" for hooks has been a matter of survival for black women to consciously resist realness norms producing destructive, fetishistic, stereotypical cinematic portrayals of black women and men. With respect to viewer response to *The Passion*, the oppositional gaze represents a site of resistance to dominant forms of atonement discourse. This is a site for raising questions about assumed understandings and outcomes; and a place to question connections between the religious horizon of meaning encouraged by this film and other meaning constructions in society.

I primarily analyze the body of viewer response to *The Passion* available through the online source, "The Independent Movie Database" (referred to hereafter as the IMDb); this online site claims to be "the earth's Biggest Movie Database" with over 20 million visits per month; and I also reference more briefly reviews and news reports from religious and non-religious publications. As of Nov. 11, 2004, 2,239 individuals, mostly but not exclusively from the United States, had posted online reviews of *The Passion* in the IMDb.

**The Passion and Atonement Images: from the "Neutral Gaze"**

Viewer response in the IMDb indicates that for many, the attempt of the film to communicate the meaning of Jesus' death along the lines of the atonement images
of penal substitution and christus victor, both of which are conflated with sacrificial images, was absorbed uncritically by a huge proportion, if not majority of the viewer respondents. This is the "neutral gaze" that the film sets up at the outset, when the passage from Isaiah 53 comes on the screen: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted." Gibson's interviews before the film's release clearly laid out the dominance of these three metaphors. He said his own hope was "that the message (of the movie) will change lives, (and) remind them of the enormity of the sacrifice that was made for all of us." Or in another interview, Gibson comments, "In the Old Covenant, blood was required. In the New Covenant, blood was required. Jesus could have pricked his finger, but he didn't he went all the way." Along these same lines, IMDb reviewers write,

- "It was God Himself who allowed his Son to be crucified, so that there could be reconciliation between Him and His people."
  
  USA

- "The amount of pain He endured and the blood which was shed is nearly unbearable to watch, until you remember He did it voluntarily for you and for me. Bearing this in mind, one of the most bloody scenes is transformed into an act of eternal sacrifice."
  
  Texas

- I saw this film because I have a passion for seeing good overcoming evil, truth triumphing over lies, hope triumphing out of absolute darkness and despair."
In other interviews Gibson focuses more on the battle imagery from christus victor atonement portrayals, such as in an interview with *Christianity Today* conducted just before the film's release, when he compares the struggles he encountered in the making of this film to the cosmic battle against evil waged by Christ on the cross:

"The big realms are slugging it out. We're just the meat in the sandwich. And for some reason we're worth it. I don't know why, but we are."  

The same viewers who unquestioningly absorbed the atonement images of penal substitution, christus victor and sacrifice cried, got on their knees, prayed in the theatre, felt fear and trepidation and describe other deeply emotional responses to the film.

- "... It reached out to the human heart, grabbed it, squeezed it, squeezed it harder and harder, and crushed it, then built it back up again."

  New York

- "The scourging Christ took from the cat of nine tails from Pontius Pilate's soldiers gripped my heart and I could no longer hold the tears back... The reality of Christ going through this cruel death showed his love for us... It was the only way to satisfy the payment for sin"

  Virginia

Viewers conforming to "the neutral gaze" experienced conversion, were strengthened in their faith, and felt a deeper sense of gratitude.
• "I took three people with me last week on Easter and one of them prayed with me and was saved!"

Illinois

• "It made me want to go to church again."

New York

• "If you are a believer, this movie at least should convict you to fall in love with the Savior and walk with him daily."

Washington

At the same time, even before the film's release, evangelical Christians busily set about creating various online and other commercial programs to utilize the film as a proselytizing tool, such as that from the "Life Together Today" link on the ChristianityToday website, which offers "Five ways your small groups can turn this movie into ministry."

Additional websites such as "The Life: Explore The Passion of the Christ" are unabashed in their attempt to utilize the film for the purpose of proselytizing, "The brutal scenes that were so vividly portrayed in The Passion of the Christ - the scourging, the torment and finally the cross - were all part of God's plan to bring you and I back into relationship with him..." These sites continue the emotional impact of the atonement images in the film by emphasizing a kind of salvation calculus, based primarily on substitution metaphors and guiding the pilgrim through a series of easy steps, from separation from God and its corollary, eternal
damnation, to personal invitation of Jesus as their Savior, complete forgiveness of sins and movement into harmony with God.

What plays heavily into this salvation calculus is the violence embedded in the atonement images themselves. All three atonement images not only emphasize violent action, they depend upon it, whether through the shedding of blood, in sacrificial images, the violence of war, in christus victor, or the meting out of suffering and punishment, in substitution. Another evangelical website connected to the film carries the notion of this necessary violence in a salvation calculus to its logical conclusion when the writer, after explaining that Jesus died in the place of humankind, wonders, "how Jesus as one man could possibly die and stay dead only for a few days . . . and still manage to pay off several billion eternities of separation from God?" He goes on to answer his own question with the creation of a mathematical equation: "Jesus yielding infinite life x 10 minutes =infinite eternities of spiritual death payments."10

While the violence in The Passion widely has been either hailed or condemned, a deeper analysis of the role the violence plays in the film largely has been missing. Those IMDb reviewers, however, who respond positively to the atonement images presented by this film, not only accept the film's violent images but proclaim them to be indispensable, "necessary," a seamless continuation of the violence embedded in the atonement metaphors themselves. The violence in The
Passion is precisely, for these viewers, what makes this movie "real." Viewers speak of the film as a kind of "documentary" revealing the true reality of Jesus' sufferings.

- "Everything, as far as the Bible is concerned, is biblically accurate and the severity and brutality of it all is as real as it gets."
  Oklahoma

- ". . . No matter how much pain we are subjected to, we need only to believe in him and the pain would be nothing more than an experience to make us stronger."
  West Virginia

Thus, viewing the violence is something these viewers say they need to do, painful and difficult though that may be, because it is part of the same calculus of salvation, "necessary" for them to view just as much as for Jesus to have suffered. The stage for such a reaction was set by Gibson early on in his Primetime interview before the film's release:

  I wanted it to be shocking. And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge . . . so that they see the enormity - the enormity of that sacrifice - to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule.11

This, then, takes us to an unmistakable reaction wrought by this film in the hearts and minds of those viewers I describe as operating within a "neutral gaze," that is, the emotional response of guilt and shame evoked by the film.
"... We should embrace the movie and be thankful and aware that Jesus died for us. What a comforting thought. I know I am loved. I really loved this movie and was filled with guilt but also so happy to know and be reminded about how much we all are loved."

"I just watched this movie and I just felt so ashamed because Jesus suffered all this and yet he was still able to see good?"

Phillipines

_The Passion and Atonement Images: An Oppositional Gaze_

How then, might one describe "the project of mastery," to use Butler's terminology, with respect to this film? Seen from the perspective of the "neutral gaze," the atonement narrative based in the three metaphors is passed off as omniscient, no perspective at all, something to be felt, not analyzed, and much less something to be questioned. An important part of this project of mastery is the way Gibson's own story and intention in making the film coincide with the same omniscient perspective. It is as if he would like to have it both ways. Part of the narrative surrounding this film involves the intertwining of christus victor imagery with compelling repetition of Gibson's own battles with addiction, suicide, and conversion. In addition to regaling viewers with intimate details of these personal struggles, Gibson also takes pains in interviews to describe details such as mass being celebrated every day on the set of the film, Cazievel (who plays Jesus) being struck more than once by lightening, and other cosmic forces dueling either to enliven or destroy the process of filmmaking itself. Gibson would have us see him as a faithful believer all too aware of his own failings and needs.
Yet the "realness norms" encouraged in the film can be traced much further, for Gibson not only plays the repentant sinner with respect to this film, but interjects himself as the Christ figure in the midst of the cosmic battle. For Gibson, however, the cosmic battle to which he refers has less to do with Christ battling the forces of cosmic evil, and more with Gibson himself warring with critics who underscore the film's anti-semitic elements, or question its historical reliability or purpose with respect to the film's overwhelming violence. For instance, on the Jay Leno Tonight Show, when asked by Jay if he would forgive one reviewer, Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, who had been particularly sharp in his criticism of the film, Gibson paraphrased the words of Jesus, saying that he absolutely would forgive Rich, "You try to perform an act of love even for those who persecute you, and I think that's the message of the film." Unfortunately, in an earlier column in the *New York Times*, Rich had quoted other less charitable feelings expressed by Gibson and printed in an article in the Sept. *New Yorker*, when Gibson raged with respect to Rich's criticism of the film, "I want to kill him. . . I want his intestines on a stick. . . I want to kill his dog."

Thus, the first point to make from the perspective of an oppositional gaze is that to assume this gaze is to risk punishment for daring to question the omniscient perspective, a reality not lost on some IMDb reviewers:
"I have just come back from watching The Passion" and desperately need to air my views, not least because I went with ten church-goers who were all completely "moved," "touched," and "reaffirmed" in their faith that they dare not hear anyone speak against the film."

"To many people, it's a masterpiece and saying anything bad about the film becomes akin to saying something bad about Christianity."

In her description of black women's "oppositional gaze" bell hooks writes, "We are afraid (as black women) to talk about ourselves as spectators because we have been so abused by the gaze. . ."¹⁵ that promised in the atonement theory of substitution, where punishment is emphasized as being meted out by God Himself as a righteous response to human sinfulness.

Not all IMDb viewers accept "The Passion's" violence as necessary and realistic; some are skeptical, remarking that the violence of the film, more than anything else, left them feeling numbed or "bored."

"It sure is bloody and shocking, I'll be the first to admit that. . . Bloody and boring, the most 'painful' combination a film can have."

"Basically, the only thing that happens is: Jesus gets tortured - Jesus gets tortured - Jesus gets tortured - Jesus gets tortured - Jesus is going to a mountain with his cross - Jesus dies and resurrects. Oh, sorry, did I ruin the movie for you now?"

According to film scholar Laura Mulvey, in film the camera's look is "disavowed" in order to create a "realistic" world for the spectator.¹⁶ In this convincing world on the screen, we watch from the safety of our seats in the darkened auditorium as our
"surrogate" (Mulvey's word, and how telling a word in connection with this film!) performs with supposed "verisimilitude." Mulvey's analysis helps us to explore just how the pervasive violence contributes to supposed realism in this film, in ironic contrast to the criticism of many religion scholars who have claimed that the scenes of torture are neither biblically nor historically accurate. One IMDb reviewer compared the tactics used in this film to those of Leni Riefenstahl's. While she relied on music and image to rouse emotion, this film similarly relies upon shocking violence to promote an emotional response and discourage critical analysis. What sets this particular violence apart for many, however, is precisely its "sacred" grounding, a grounding based in the atonement metaphors of sacrifice, penal substitution and christus victor at the heart of this portrayal, images themselves that depend upon and enact violence.

_The Passion_ clearly evokes not only dread and horror, but a kind of pleasure as well, literally, scopophilia, pleasure in looking and being looked at, a kind of fascination that ultimately is revealed as a species of illicit voyeurism. Among both popular and professional reviewers description of _The Passion_ as "pornographic" has emerged:

- "Just as we savor our present-day entertainment, with all the delicious violence and brutality in other hollywood blockbusters, we revel in this also, and call it a "great and powerful movie," for virtue simply of its violence and our revulsion (or admiration?) of it."
• "I fully understand that scourging and crucifixion was a terribly cruel fate but there seemed to be a real perverse enjoyment in revealing this man's suffering."

London

Viewers describe multiple physical responses to The Passion, including weeping, sweating, shaking, speechlessness, hiding their eyes, feeling sick, etc. Film scholar Barbara Creed explores the significance of these physical reactions to film as most commonly associated with the viewing of horror films. To make the connection between a religious film such as The Passion and the genre of horror film should not surprise us, for Creed demonstrates how various sub-genres of horror film specifically correspond to religious categories of abjection, relying upon sacred/taboo material elements like blood, cannibalism, corpses, human sacrifice, and bodily disfigurement. Scholar Linda Williams takes the analysis of physical response on the part of viewers one step further by claiming that in fact, the emotional response not only to horror films, but also to pornography and melodrama, may be described as a “form of ecstasy” including components of direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture. While some IMDb viewers suspect commercial instincts behind the use of violence in The Passion (it will sell more movie tickets) or link the violence to what one IMDb reviewer calls "some private perverse addiction to gore and blood coming out of this director's own private hell," the link between the violence and sexual stimulation has not been lost on some IMDb reviewers:
"For all you Macho guys out there, this movie is a godsend (no pun intended). Not only will you get to see Jesus get his ass kicked in a multitude of ways, you'll get to see enough blood that would make George Romero get a hard on."

Melbourne

In his review of the Passion printed in The New Republic, Leon Wieseltier comments on this same characteristic:

Torture has been depicted in films many times before, but almost always in a spirit of protest. This film makes no quarrel with the pain that it excitedly inflicts. It is a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film, and it leaves you with the feeling that the man who made it hates life.20

The Passion and Atonement Images: What Dangers are Embedded Here?

The controversy surrounding this film creates a sharp relief of the potential dangers and pitfalls that reside where I began this analysis, with the atonement metaphors of sacrifice, penal substitution and christus victor. Christian-based websites and other promotional/programmatic material associated with The Passion make clear the growing supremacy of these particular metaphors as interpretive lenses through which to understand the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth’s life, ministry, death, crucifixion and resurrection on the part of various growing groups on the American scene.

I ask what contemporary social realities are impacted by this modern-day cinematic version of atonement? What social project of mastery is being
legitimated and delegitimated in popular and professional viewer response to this film? An oppositional gaze looks beyond an "omniscient" perspective that requires an unquestioning stance with respect to these metaphors to inquire as to the impact of their absorption on viewers of this film.

Further analysis is needed to understand the growing interpretive emphasis on a narrow salvation calculus that grows out of the metaphor of penal substitution, but that is also related to sacrifice. One key question, I believe, is this: To what degree does acceptance of this horrific violence as "necessary" not only justify but even baptize other forms of social violence as likewise necessary and salvific? It is clear that at least some viewers of "The Passion" are absorbing the calculus of penal substitution framed as a kind of domestic violence in a way that would make feminist critics of Christian atonement cringe:

- "To me it was as if Mary is watching her son being ripped to shreds in front of her. For a moment the good son, the loving mother and the Father who seems distant, demanding the sacrifice, form an interesting family dynamic. Lesser people would have failed, but Mary in the end understands that her son's sacrifice is necessary."

Spain

If, even crudely, a form of divine domestic violence subconsciously is not merely justified, but hailed as "necessary" and "salvific," and internalized uncritically by millions of viewers as a kind of religious experience, film as liturgy or religious catharsis, what impact can we expect such experience to continue in real life
domestic and social realms? Moreover, what are the social outcomes of the evoked reactions of shame and guilt we see so clearly among IMDb reviewers? Finally, to what extent does such a calculus reduce the complexity of Christian understandings of salvation into a narrowly privatistic, triumphalistic and self-justifying enterprise? These are important questions for further exploration.

In addition, one wonders to what degree the religious rationalization behind the punishing feature of penal substitution is segueing into other forms of social punishment becoming evermore the vogue of the country following 9/11. IMDb reviewers write,

- "all I could think was how incredibly, unbearably ironic this whole movie and society are given the state of the world and Christianity right now. It amazes me that people will watch this movie and say how powerful it is... When in the same breath they are for war and the death penalty and hate gays..."

  Los Angeles

- "If this converts anyone to Christianity, it will convert them to a twisted and perverted form of Christianity - Christianity for our warlike and negative times."

  England

And Weseltier comments, "Is this film violent? Of course it is, but this is God's violence. This violence is good for America."

Earlier I remarked on the slippery slide Gibson encourages between the christus victor atonement imagery in his film and his own internal battle with
addiction and external battle with critics of his film. This same imagery is reaching
ever larger proportions, as conservative defenders of Gibson and the film draw upon
the same metaphor of the cosmic battleground between good and evil in their
righteous reaction to critics of the film, increasingly described not only as "the left
of Hollywood," but the forces of evil itself:

- "The cultural Left threw everything it had this winter against Mel Gibson
  and this film. . . Christians saw this and seethed. Millions of people who
  never go to the movies poured out of the woodwork to see this film. . . The
  Cultural Right has demonstrated its power to make something a colossal hit
  that the entire secularist Hollywood community wanted to see fail. This
  will have big consequences."

Along these same lines, the website, www.SeethePassion.com, describes the battle
to promote the movie and protect it against its critics as "bigger than Mel Gibson,
and even bigger than this movie, a defining moment in the Culture War for the
future of our country, our civilization and world."

Frank Rich of The New York Times further analyzes the archeology of
cultural absorption of christus victor imagery. The Passion, according to Rich, is
just one more element of a growing cultural binary thinking, demonstrated not only
at the level of popular viewers of this film, but increasingly encouraged at the level
of our country's highest leadership." In his review of the so-called documentary,
The Faith of George W. Bush, Rich writes,
(Bush's) view of faith as a Manichaean scheme of black and white to be acted out in a perpetual war against evil is synergistic with the violent poetics of the best-selling "Left Behind" novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and Mel Gibson's cinematic blood fest.

My concluding point is to emphasize that these same violent poetics must be acknowledged to have deep roots in the atonement metaphors of sacrifice, christus victor and penal substitution themselves. If a neutral gaze assumes this atonement discourse to be omniscient, beyond question, no perspective at all, an oppositional gaze interrogates the repetitions of these images as they appear in and impact culture with the aim of developing a site of resistance from which we may pose questions back not only to the creators of this film, but more importantly, to the images themselves, the ways they are communicated and integrated by individuals and communities, and the practices that are enacted as a result of this same integration.

- "I don't think seeing someone getting tortured for a couple of hours constitutes a religious experience."

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3 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” Feminist Film Theory, 313.

4 See The Internet Movie Database user comments on the film (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/usercomments).


7 David Neff and Jane Johnson Struck, "Dude, That was Graphic,” 2/23/04 (http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/interviews/melgibson.html).


9 The Life.com (http://thelife.com/spirit/joy_1.html).


15 hooks, 315.


17 Mulvey, 58-60.


19 Linda Williams, ”Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” *Feminist Film Theory*, 269.


21 Wieseltier.
22 See the Passion.com.