

Behold the Man: Heroic Masochism and Mel Gibson's *Passion* as Masculine Rite of Passage

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With over \$370 million in domestic ticket sales, director Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* is, as of mid-2014, the highest earning R-rated movie in U.S. history. Its closest competitor is Andy and Lana Wachowski's cyberpunk epic *The Matrix Reloaded*, almost \$100 million behind (Box Office Mojo 2013). A lot of people have seen Gibson's film, but *The Passion* is outsized in a second way: the mass of commentary, criticism and controversy it engendered. The journalistic responses across a range of media from the *New York Times* and CNN to Christian Right publications—such as those from James Dobson's Focus on Family—are best measured in gigabytes. The scholarly literature alone easily runs to thousands of pages, a looming bulk daunting to anyone considering jumping into the fray.¹

Reactions from anthropologists have, however, been relatively sparse.² Yet the event at the center of Gibson's *Passion*—the graphic depiction of a prolonged episode of judicial torture and execution—is best read less as a rite of *sacrifice* and more as a rite of *passage* of the particular type that has long fascinated anthropologists.

And while the cinematic violence perpetrated in the film certainly contains a sacrificial component, the main ritual work it accomplishes is *initiatory*: the man Jesus is transformed through the performance of a blood-soaked rite into the Christ. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1992, 1998) argues that both types of rite—sacrifice and initiation—are intimately related, both requiring a symbolic or concrete act of killing. However counterintuitive this might seem, in the special logic of sacrifice *and* initiation such violence is necessary to the efficacy of the rite: the initiate must pass through death, through a great emptying out of the ordinary vitality of life, to be born again in a transformed state of being (Bloch 1998, 176). At the level of ritual initiation, the scourging and crucifixion constitute not a punishment, but a privilege.

The initiatory character of the violence depicted in *The Passion of the Christ* holds true for virtually *all* Passion narratives, including those presented in the gospels. But in its emphases and stylizations—and perhaps most of all in its extra-canonical artistic license—Gibson's version relies upon the *gendered* character of the narrative. While not all rites of passage are gender specific—e.g. boys and girls both become Christians through the rite of baptism—an explicit gendering of the initiate is often central to the socio-politics of such rites. More than just transforming one type of person into another, initiation permanently separates those who can be initiated from those who never can be because they are of the wrong gender, race, class or background (Bourdieu 1991, 119).

Looking at *The Passion of the Christ* with awareness of rites of passage into adult masculinity and privilege, I insist that gender is crucial for understanding this film. My key argument is that the particular Passion narrative selected by Gibson interpolates its audience so as to constellate a militarized, masculinized form of Christianity that presumes, indeed depends upon, the socially authorized suffering of obedient (read “soldierly”) sons. While the controversy generated by the film bears witness to the ways in which this constellation of gendered religion, militarization, and public consent is resisted and rejected, the incoherence in much of the criticism speaks to a significant cultural blind spot related to masculine suffering.

The highly stylized suffering of Jesus in the film—which makes use of some 135 digital effects to produce the viscerally “real” affect attested by sympathetic viewers (Magrid 2004, 57; Prince 2006, 13)—depends on a male body at its center for ritual coherence. A powerful form of gender politics is at work in *The Passion*, grounded in what I have elsewhere called *heroic masochism* (Gardiner 2013a): the socially desirable suffering inflicted on and accepted by men as a warrant for masculine privilege.

As I lay out the argument for understanding *The Passion of the Christ* as a masculine rite of passage writ large, I will point up some of the difficulties in naming such suffering. In conclusion, I will sketch out why such an interpretation is important not just in understanding Gibson’s film, but in making sense of a wide range of cultural forms and social phenomena in the contemporary United States of which the film is symptomatic.

Rites of Passage and Masculine Fragility

In the anthropological tradition a rite of passage is understood as a series of ritualized acts that, correctly performed, actualize a socially recognizable change in status (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1960). Through the correct performance of such rites the single person is married, the child enters the communion of a particular faith, the layman becomes a doctor or a judge and the deceased joins the ancestors. Such rites can be as common as name-giving or as rare as coronations; as minimal as a Las Vegas impulse wedding or as prolonged as the highest levels of formal education in the United States.

The emphasis in such rites is on *auspicious performance*: the rite must be performed in the right way, at the right time, by the right ritual experts upon the *appropriate* ritual subjects. Absent any of these qualifications the change in status that the rite is meant to accomplish is not certain. There is a risk of nullification or social opprobrium. A groom or bride of the “wrong” gender, as locally construed, might not be recognized; an inaugurated president of the “wrong” race might be challenged to prove the naturalness of his qualifying citizenship; the corpse of a person who died in the “wrong” way might be denied the rite of burial.

Herein the focus is primarily on that subset of rites related to masculine initiation: rituals that transform male-bodied children into *men*, investing them with masculine status. While Passion narratives in their variety certainly partake of various ritual correlates and antecedents—e.g. judicial ordeal (Asad 1983), cu-

rative exit rituals, and more specifically the ancient Hebrew Day of Atonement ritual found in Leviticus 16 (Maclean 2007)—I have chosen to consider Gibson’s film version through the narrow lens of man-making rituals within the context of contemporary US culture.

Masculinity is, virtually everywhere, considered to be a rather fragile status that has to be produced through processes of man-making rituals (Gilmore 1990). But if this is everywhere considered true, the degree of militarization in a society—political, economic, and symbolic—greatly influences the particular qualities considered most important to inculcate in men (Gardiner 2004; Goldstein 2001). In heavily militarized societies—and the contemporary United States is certainly one such (Bilmes and Stiglitz 2008; Lutz 2001; Turse 2008)—the “military virtues” of obedience, courage, and above all “toughness” of body and mind are paramount. At the same time the alienation of the civilian world from actual military experience makes the need for such hardened men contestable (Belkin 2012; Gardiner 2013b). In such a context, Gibson’s film can—and I argue should—be seen as an intervention in an ongoing debate about masculinity and how men should be made. In an important sense, it is about rites of passage.

Virtually all rites of passage have certain elements in common, following a logically necessary tripartite structural progression of separation-margin-aggregation first described by French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1960). Within the ritual horizon of this structure there are three sorts of tasks such rites *may* accomplish—although the actual emphasis varies a great deal across cultures. In the most general terms rites of passage accomplish the following:

1) They prepare the initiate for assumption of the new status through training, teaching, and emotional priming;

2) They mark the transition symbolically, demarcating the precise moment when the new status, with all of its prerogatives and responsibilities, is assumed, following a “liminal” period during which initiates are “no longer classified” as they were but “are not yet classified” as they will be at the conclusion of the rite (Turner 1967, 96); and

3) They institute a socially relevant distinction between those who can be initiated and those who can never be (Bourdieu 1991, 118).

The first of these three efficacies is, broadly speaking, practical—imparting role-specific skills and associated knowledge to the initiate. The second is primarily psycho-social, easing the transition from status to status by publically differentiating between the initiated and the uninitiated, declaiming the *achieved* character of the status—particularly important with respect to masculinity rites, as the passage to manhood is widely construed as both fraught and highly contingent (Gilmore 1990, 104). The third efficacy is unabashedly political. It marks out a category of persons as distinct—ostensibly from those who have not yet gone through the ritual, but more permanently from those who never will. In Bourdieu’s terms, such rites do not just mark a “before and after” but also cast a shadow of exclusion, adding the patina of investment to what might otherwise be mistaken as a simple matter of “natural” classification. The rite says: “this man is a man—implying that he is a real man, which is not always immediately obvious. It tends to make the smallest, weakest, in short the most effeminate man into a truly manly man, separated by a difference in nature and

essence from the most masculine woman, the tallest, strongest woman, etc.” (Bourdieu 1991, 119).

It is a matter of no small import that between the latter two ritual efficacies—the symbolic marking of before and after, and the institutionalization of a permanent exclusion—there is an inbuilt tension. The institution of manhood draws a line of exclusion meant to be independent of any particular masculine qualities; the symbolic demarcation of status transition is almost always construed as dependent on successful negotiation of the rite, which in turn requires the correct performance of normative masculinity exactly in its locally most salient qualities.

Those locally salient features of manhood vary a great deal from group to group, but a common pattern is that in the most militarized societies the “military virtues” of toughness, physical courage and obedience to authority tend to be most closely associated with “real” masculinity and inculcated in rites of passage (Gardiner 2004; Goldstein 2001). Such rites can be lengthy and elaborate, taking months to complete like those found in Bantu-speaking East Africa (Gutmann 1970; Wagner 1949), but along the way they often include one or more acute ordeals. Adolescent circumcision is an example, found traditionally in Africa, Oceania, and Australia (Beidelman 1987, 511). Also common are various forms of flogging, beating, scarification, cutting, piercing, ingestion of hallucinatory poisons, fasting, exposure and physical exhaustion—and in virtually every case initiates are enjoined to endure the often excruciating pain stoically, without crying out or otherwise showing outward signs of suffering (Gilmore 1990; Herdt 1982).

It is important to emphasize that pain inflicted and pain endured in these rituals is not incidental, but central to their meaning as construed by cultural insiders. Boys will not become men, it is widely believed, unless they are subjected to such ordeals to drive the weakness out of them (Gilmore 1990, 14). That is, manhood is not a natural attainment, but something that has to be produced through the testing and training of the initiators. It has to be proven, earned and achieved; it is widely understood as the most fragile of constructs (Gilmore 1990, 115; Connell 2005, 12). It is only a seeming irony that the fragility of masculinity is not so much eradicated by ordeals of initiation, but impressed on the consciousness of the initiate. Weakness is a permanent feature that the initiate must forever guard against, lest the allure of comfort and softness that is the necessary concomitant of being alive prove too strong (Belkin 2012, 4-5; Gardiner 2013a, 10).

The tension within (military) masculinity is not so much in the transition from boy to man, in which a disposition to reflexive self-monitoring with respect to displaying weakness is inculcated, but between the need for such inculcation and the institutional demarcation of essential differences between men and women. That is, if masculinity is not an essence, but a list of characteristics that must be inculcated, then the institution of manhood is suspect and unstable. The door is open to libertarian and individualistic logics allowing a woman to fill normatively masculine roles, most quintessentially soldierly roles, provided that she can successfully perform the requisite qualities (Belkin 2012; Enloe 1983).

This tension between institutionalized essence (naturalized masculinity) and a permanently fragile bundle of qualities that must be inculcated, tested and repeatedly proven is nothing new in masculine initiation. The context of reception, however, has changed radically in recent decades. Thus the context of production of *The Passion of the Christ*—an early twenty-first century United States caught up in the first throes of post-9/11 militarization—demands special attention. This is *not* because *The Passion* is a straightforward celebration of soldierly masculinity of the sort depicted in many of the films addressed by Susan Jeffords (1994) in her now classic *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. Notwithstanding the claims of critics such as biblical scholar Paula Fredriksen (2004, 63) who sees *The Passion* as little more than a riff on the torture-execution scene in *Braveheart* (1995), the underlying structure is more complicated. As astutely argued by Kent Brintnall: "...the accusation ... that Gibson's apparent reliance on action genre tropes distorted the Christian narrative fails to acknowledge that the suffering-hero narrative predates Christianity and had already provided a framing device for the gospel narratives" (Brintnall 2001, 56). *The Passion* shares this structure with films as diverse as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003), *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *A History of Violence* (2005), *First Blood* (1982), *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), and so on, ad nauseam.

The suffering-hero iterations in so many Hollywood films work as a kind of echo chamber, amplifying the points of reference for the sympathetic viewer. The masculine rite of passage structure

was always already embedded in the Passion narrative and Gibson's particular emphases highlight, rather than elide, the tension between processes of active inculcation and evaluation of gendered initiation. The result is a rather brutal gendered politics imagined on the male body of the character of Jesus that has been underappreciated in the voluminous commentary.³

The Passion of Gibson's Christ vs. Abject Androgyny

Yet if the gender politics of *The Passion* have largely been elided in both scholarly and journalistic reactions, it is not because no one noticed the violence that hid them in plain sight. Indeed, running neck-and-neck with justifiable condemnations of the film's anti-Semitism have been commentaries deploring its graphic violence. Much of the latter, in David Greven's apt summary, "...reeked of middlebrow disdain rather than an understanding of the varieties of Christian experience" (2009, 205). American critics of Gibson's filmic violence, however secular, are heirs to a politics of representational reticence and austerity grounded in the uneasiness of many forms of Protestantism with the visual (Morgan 2005, 90). Combining a watery iconoclasm with the platitudes of progressive theology, many of these critiques—e.g. A.O. Scott's (2004) in the *New York Times* and David Denby's (2004) in the *New Yorker*—explicitly denounce the gratuitous nature of the violence in *The Passion*. But they misidentify the ritual core of the film when they take Gibson to task for missing the main theological point, which they see as "...not the physical suffering

of the man but the sacrificial nature of his death and the astonishing mystery of his transformation into godhood—the Resurrection and the triumph over carnality” (Denby 2004, 84). These critics of Gibson contend that his film subjects us to a Hollywood action movie-cum-horror-flick that “essentially consists of a man being beaten, tortured and killed in graphic and lingering detail” (Scott 2004, E1).

Unlike Scott and Denby, I interpret the violence in *The Passion of the Christ* as anything but gratuitous—and this is a position I share, quite uncomfortably, with the conservative Catholic and Evangelical viewers most positively inclined to the film.⁴ For this set of film goers—a far larger demographic, it should be noted, than the readership of the *New Yorker* or the *NYT*—the violence depicted in the movie is an index of its “realism,” indicating that “Gibson had gotten it right” (Prince 2006, 12, see also: Brintnall 2008; Brown, Keeler and Lindvall 2007; Wood, Jindra and Baker 2004). The violence is also, I argue, essential to the deeply emotional connection many such viewers made with the film, a connection that depends on a combination of the availability of the ritual script of male initiation on the one hand and on the other hand the human capacity to recall their own initiatory experiences, however tame by comparison.

Most viscerally for sympathetic Catholic viewers with experience praying the Stations of the Cross—but more generally for the film’s supporters—*The Passion* acts as an immersive, fantastic tableau of identification that recalls embodied memories of real suffering and compassion. While the hardened, militarized social world that makes such logic of sanctified suffering believable and laudable certainly

warrants the closest possible scrutiny, it is spurious to fault the film or dismiss it for successfully tapping into these forms of desire, without attempting to explicate and place them in a wider cultural context.⁵

Such a context must start with a doubled object: the Passion narrative as it has come down to us and the film itself. The former object is almost infinitely plural, encompassing not only the canonical gospels, but various “apocryphal” works, the quite early and independent accounts of two historians, Cornelius Tacitus and Flavius Josephus (Crossan 1995, 5), the development of devotional practices such as praying the Stations of the Cross and a suffocating mass of subsequent products from Medieval Passion plays, Renaissance art, and Romantic mysticism down to contemporary cinematic cousins. Obviously even a glance at the bulk of this material is far beyond the scope of this article—yet a few points must be established about the core of the Passion narratives before turning to the film.

First, it requires no great act of New Testament scholarship to recognize that at the center of the crucifixion story is an act of bloody violence inflicted on a specifically male body. This seemingly simple and undisputed fact, however, slips out of one’s grasp like a stick of butter. The suffering body of Jesus of Nazareth in its specificity—images of which have been so ubiquitous—is obfuscated, occulted, by the transcendent Body of Christ.

Unlike Jesus the man, the Christ partakes not of a particular, embodied masculinity in the gospel narratives, but of the universal and categorical masculinity which has so often been used to represent *humanity* as such. The body of Jesus is un-

doubtedly male, but the focus of Christological debate has always been on negotiating the relationship between human and divine, with most Christian traditions settling on the permanently ambivalent position taken at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE). Known as the “hypostatic union,” this doctrine holds that the Christian savior has/had two “natures”—that of “Jesus” (the human) and “Christ” (the transcendent divine)—which are permanently bound together in one “person,” i.e. “Jesus Christ” (Davis 1990, 187). This doctrine, both affirming and denying duality, tends to obscure the personal and corporeal specificity of the man (that is, the person of male sex and masculine gender) who is also the Christ. This leaves a problem for representation: how *exactly* does one visualize two natures in one person? In such a context, and upping the stakes because the canonical source material is so sparse on these issues, visual representation becomes the primary means for interpolating a personal Jesus. Put another way, the person/body of Jesus which is so vaguely adumbrated in the gospels and complexly interpreted in Christology becomes something close to an “empty signifier” (Barthes 1972, 117), a vague mental image that can mean anything to anyone. Only in specific visual representations is this emptiness given form and flesh, with particular representational decisions pointing to radically different conceptual frames and cultural politics. In the richness of Christological art there are two tropes—*androgyny* and *vital evanescence*—that are of particular interest in understanding Gibson’s choices in *The Passion*.

Given the ways in which important gender tells—e.g. hair style and length, clothing choices—are so dependent on geographic and historical context, androgyny can be a complex object to identify. Representations read as gender ambiguous in one age may have been seen as manly at the time they were produced. What is well known, however, is that many representations of Jesus—from those of Italian Renaissance paintings to the early twentieth century portraits of Warner Sallman—whatever their creators may have intended, have been critiqued by conservative Christians as sentimental and effeminate (Morgan 1992, 867; Kupfer 2008, 15). For example Sallman’s mass reproduced *Head of Christ* has been celebrated by admirers for its depiction of gentle humility, allowing viewers to interpolate Jesus as benevolent and accessible, as kindness personified (Morgan 2005, 5). Critics, however, have found the same image to be intolerably feminized. One Lutheran seminarian said of Sallman’s familiar image that in it “we have a pretty picture of a woman with a curling beard who has just come from the beauty parlor with a Halo shampoo, but we do not have the Lord who died and rose again!” (Morgan 1992, 867).

The visual rhetoric of *The Passion* comes down emphatically on the side of those who would reject androgyny in the representation of Jesus. This is obvious enough from the film and Gibson has reinforced the point, stating in an interview that he “didn’t want to see Jesus looking really pretty. I wanted to mess up one of his eyes, destroy it” (Boyer 2003, 60). Thus the Jesus of the film is relent-

lessly embodied and masculinized, but such embodiment does not obviate the problem of representing the inherently unstable hypostasis of man and god. Rejecting androgyny as a mode of representing the embodiment of the universal and transcendent, Gibson turns to the second important trope of Christological depiction: vital evanescence.

Vital evanescence is one of the central motifs in ritual logics of both masculine initiation and sacrifice (Bloch 1992, 1998). It indexes the theme of the sublation of the corporeal, opening a door between animal life and transcendent being through the draining away—as for example in sacrificial exsanguination—of bodily vitality. That is, not only in Christianity but in religious practice infused with sacrificial logics more generally, such rites accomplish a metaphysical “rebirth” to a higher or transfigured state by performing a passage through death (Bloch 1998, 170).

Now, it should be noted that the two tropes—androgyny and vital dissipation—are by no means incapable of simultaneous deployment. Indeed the genre of Christ crucified is suffused with such dual-trope depictions that feature an emaciated, fine-featured Jesus ineffably hovering at death’s door. In fact, to the extent any still image refuses overt masculinization of the crucified Jesus, it invites a feminizing gaze *because* of its de-vitalization. Long-established misogynist reception regimes that readily assimilate weakness and violation to the feminine, with a complementary tendency to imagine women as the only blameless victims, support such readings (Clover 1992, 12).

Thus rejection of physical androgyny is not enough to secure a full-blooded masculinity. Given that Gibson can hardly avoid *both* androgyny and vital dissipation, he risks the obvious reading of the embodied Jesus as *victim*, a victim of superior Roman military power—a reading that has to be deflected.

The Passion of the Christ accomplishes this deflection of the androgynous brilliantly by the relentless dramatization of an embodied male Jesus—depicted by the conventionally handsome and obviously masculine James Caviezel—stoically enduring sacrificial-cum-initiatory-violence. By subjecting viewers to scene after brutal scene of cinematic torture, Gibson uses “movie magic” to multiply the visual spectacle of suffering until it becomes nearly unendurable to the audience. In the process, according to David Morgan, “Gibson wants to destroy an entire way of seeing and install in its place a manly Jesus who is his father’s son, one who by virtue of extreme iconoclasm has been purged of rival ways of seeing. The film plunges viewers into a protracted agony in order to wrench from them the devotional gaze that is fixed on such imagery as Warner Sallman’s portrait of Jesus” (Morgan 2005, 5). Gibson’s choice is by no means outside the two-trope Christological symbolic economy of androgyny and vital evanescence. Rather, it emphasizes the latter to the exclusion of the former: Jesus’ body is destroyed in the process of becoming the Christ. This destruction is carefully modulated as the stoic endurance of a warrior, lest it be read as feminized helplessness in the face of superior force.

Vicariously Speaking: Films, Mirrors, Rites and Mental Time Travel

No matter how skillful Gibson's use of spectacular violence to deflect androgyny, his film risks a second deflection as mere "violent pornography," absent an alternative reception regime (Prince 2006, 12). The male rite of passage provides just such an interpretive framework. While it is important to keep in mind that there are crucial differences between a ritual, which intends a permanent transformation of status, and a film which can at best evoke the emotional states associated with such rituals (Bloch 1998, 174), the specific instance of *The Passion* tests this limit. Granted, no audience is liable to forget that it is in spectator mode while viewing the film. The subject matter in this case is doubly ritualized, interpretively derived from pre-existing ritual forms and reflecting back the embodied ritual of the Stations of the Cross. The film is, in effect, ritually saturated. Therefore, the tripartite stages of space-time, analogous to the stages of rites of passage are unsurprisingly foregrounded in *The Passion*. The basic structure can be adumbrated as follows:

1) Separation. Opening in the Garden of Gethsemane following the Last Supper, Jesus is removed from his former life, betrayed by Judas, arrested and tried by Jewish authorities and sentenced by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

2) Margin. The bulk of the film is consumed with the torture and crucifixion of Jesus—the "liminal" period in the rite during which Jesus has left behind his existence as a man, however extraordinary, but has not yet been transformed into the Christ.

3) Aggregation. Having passed through death, Jesus returns—very briefly—as the risen Christ, man reborn as a god.

What follows is a slightly more detailed recapitulation of key moments in the film, highlighting references to masculine initiation and sacrificial violence and keeping in mind the tendency of such rites to produce a moral economy that values purposeful suffering as the essential prerequisite of soldierly toughness and masculine privilege.

In the opening scene Jesus, all but consumed by the terror of his own immanent crucifixion, is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. As the camera stalks him like a psycho-killer in a slasher film, Jesus experiences the *agony*, the struggle with his own human weakness. John Debney's score, a head-on collision of creep show nightmare and bullroarer in the bush, jangles our nerves and builds dread. Like any initiate on the cusp of an ordeal, the mortal man struggles with the temptation of weakness and refusal. In one of the film's most effective innovations, Gibson personifies this temptation in the a-scriptural introduction of an effeminate and horrifically seductive Satan.

Played by the youthful Italian actress Rosalinda Celentano, this Satan literally glows with androgynous perversity, combining "so many levels of gendered and sexual depravity, through so many symbolic modes of sign, play, and parody, that s/he ends up emerging as one of the bravura inventions of Gibson's film" (Greven 2009, 207). However innovative, the gender-bent androgyny of this Satan also provides a crucial didactic clue to viewers, allowing them to negotiate the tension between the trope of androgyny

and vital evanescence *and* the complementary tension between the transformative efficacy of initiation and its institutionalizing impetus.

The introduction of the demonically beautiful androgyne into the Garden reinforces the shadow play quality of the too-easy surrender of Jesus to the soldiers, and makes it clear no compassionate or pacifist impulse motivated Jesus to tell Peter to put away his sword. The real conflict is at the supernatural level, between Jesus-as-almost-Christ and Satan as the ugly-beautiful temptation of feminine weakness. Demonstrating his masculine fitness to face the ordeal that awaits him—that is, his appropriate submission to God-the-Father—he saves face as a warrior, in effect recruiting the audience to a particular mode of identification constellated by his violent rebuke of the Devil.

In a show-stealing scene that multiplies the already “perverse” symbolism of the youthfully androgynous Satan, the Devil produces a snake that crawls from under his/her skirts, sliding with horrific lasciviousness towards Jesus, who kneels in prayer. The serpent glides caressingly over the hand of Jesus in the precise place where the nail will soon attach him to the cross. He rises, not in revulsion, but with menacing deliberateness, emphatically smashing the serpent’s head under the heel of his sandal while staring down the Devil.

In the visual economy of the film, a Jesus who might otherwise be construed as androgynous in appearance—Caviezel being a rather pretty actor when not covered in prosthetic and/or digitally conjured wounds—is rendered safely,

thoroughly masculine in contrast with Celentano’s Satan. Another way to think of this contrast is that it allows any tension about the universality of the Christ threatening the *institution* of manhood as embodied in the person of Jesus to dissipate. The institutional demarcation between masculine and feminine is reinforced by visually drawing the line between Jesus, a real man no matter how pretty, and Satan’s uncanny androgyny. The Christian universality of the hybrid being Jesus-Christ that doctrinally admits women as well as men to the ranks of salvation is here *represented* as unambiguously male, rejecting traditional androgynous depictions of the embodied Jesus and simultaneously framing viewers’ experience of that which is to come: the torturous process of vital evanescence as transformational ritual-cum-metaphysical-warfare rather than victimization.

At the same time the transformative character of the *rite* behind the movie is reinforced. In the Garden, Jesus has not yet crossed the threshold; he has not yet entered the liminal phase of the rite wherein the status transition—man to god, mirroring the transition of boy to man—is enacted. As he waits at the threshold, he establishes his *bona fides*, his right to be initiated, paralleling the pre-separation anxiety of boys awaiting their turn to be taken. Jesus acts out his worthiness by overcoming the agony and choosing the ordeal; by demonstrating filial piety in his submission to God-the-Father, and most effectively through his confrontation with the Devil: manly violence deployed with surgical precision in the rejection of androgyny!

Following the glimpse behind the metaphysical curtain, reassured that Jesus is no (unmanly) victim but a volunteer for the Cross, the literal forms of arrest, trial, judicial torture and execution that follow become mere appearances. What actually happens is the rite of passage, albeit an initiation that also doubles as a sacrifice—which is also foreshadowed in the Gethsemane scene. Satan, encountering Jesus in the midst of his human apprehension, mocks him, saying: “Do you really believe that one man can bear the full burden of sin?”

The Devil’s question is key, a reminder that the embodied human suffering that follows is exactly not gratuitous, but a sacrifice for the greater good. The masochistic embrace of crucifixion must not be construed as a perversion of desire, pleasure in pain or the embrace of abjection. Satan already occupies the abject ground. In his rejection of the satanic temptations of weakness and androgyny, Jesus chooses a path of *meaningful suffering*, of enduring for a (greatest possible) cause—taking on “the full burden of sin”—which is what I call heroic masochism (Gardiner 2013a, 31).

The film stretches out the separation phase of the ritual and builds anticipatory dread for the ordeal to come, not only through the familiarity of the narrative, but because of its emplotment as a rite of passage. Even as Christ is supposed to be crucified, ordeal is supposed to follow separation in the liminal phase of the ritual. In this context, the trial before the Sanhedrin, the questioning by Herod, the sentencing by Pilate and the crowd’s choice of Barabbas over Jesus *primarily* serve as narrative redundancy, amplifying

the masculine steadfastness of his choice.⁶ Every step he takes away from the temptation in the Garden, moving through the various moments of separation from his life that was, Jesus becomes more certain, transfigured by the workings of the rite. Gone now are the doubts and anxieties of Gethsemane, crushed like the head of Satan’s snake under his heel. Here is a steely-eyed Christ, his human body ever more disfigured. Every effort to deflect him from his purpose—which is to be crucified—is met with a laconic disdain bordering on contempt. The performance by Caviezel here is, I think, underappreciated: he sells the stoic spiritual warrior of Gibson’s imagination.

Now to the main event. Dragged before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Jesus is sentenced to flogging—the usual precursor to crucifixion, though that doom has not yet been pronounced. The beating begins. Through torture after torture, the audience, like Mary (Maia Morgenstern) and Mary Magdalen (Monica Bellucci), is held in a spell of horror and awe. Yet the reaction shots, focused on the two women, mediate audience responses which by Gibson’s design simply cannot encompass the heroic suffering of Jesus. Even to witness this artistic rendition of ritual suffering becomes for the audience a terrible ordeal—an ordeal that in its cinematic exaggeration has the power, at least for the most receptive segment of the audience, to trigger visceral body memory, what is sometimes called *mental time travel* (MTT). In MTT the subject is momentarily transported into the midst of episodic memory, essentially re-experiencing a particular event, including its sensual and emotional components (Boyer 2009, 5). While

most contemporary subjects will not have initiatory memories as distinct as the hundreds of examples described in the ethnographic record (Gilmore 1990), the depiction of ritualized suffering in the film is so thorough as to provide multiple points of identification, sufficient to provoke the recall of any personal experience of acute suffering either endured or witnessed.

The crucial point of the liminal phase occurs when Jesus, bloody and tortured beyond sensibility, beyond sanity—at one point the barbed whip used on him sticks in his back so defiantly that the burly Roman torturer is hard pressed to rip it away again—is dragged once again before Pilate. The body of Jesus is bloodied almost beyond recognition, and a feeling of exhausted nausea settles over the audience. This sickened identification of the film audience, mediated by the compassionate suffering of the maternal Mary, is in marked contrast to the onscreen audience, which is perversely blood-drunk. Meanwhile the Roman governor is visibly moved to sympathy by the sight of the tortured Jesus.

“Behold the man,” shouts Pilate, reprimanding the viciousness of the crowd as he supports Jesus by the arm, echoing the words of John 19:5.

The mob, whipped up by the sinister Jewish leadership, jeer and shout back, “Crucify him!”

Pilate’s reply is sad, that of a man who has measured human nature and found it wanting: “Isn’t this enough?” he asks. “Look at him!”

The inevitable response, of course—mandated by the scriptural source material—is the demand for immediate crucifixion.

Pilate, the soldierly figure of Imperial Rome, is thus cast as the reluctant agent of Jesus’ execution; the lion’s share of the guilt is reserved for the Jewish mob and its priestly leaders. While soldiers of Rome enact the scourging of Jesus with a giddy sadistic glee, Pilate as a Roman leader sympathizes with the suffering victim and goes along with the demands for crucifixion apparently only to keep the peace, after “washing his hands” of it. Yet even this apparent paradox is firmly rooted in the formulaic progression of the rite of passage. Jesus must be seen to choose his end, to be the heroic master of his own fate. He cannot be a feminized victim of imperial power.

“Speak to me,” pleads Pilate. “I have the power to crucify you, or else to set you free.”

“You have no power over me...” answers Jesus, “...except what is given to you from above.”

The sadism of the Roman torturers reads differently when they are considered—though it is scarcely possible—as the authorized agents of a transcendent and necessary ritual. Like circumcisers, they enact a violence on the body that outside of the ritual context would be entirely wicked, nearly incomprehensible. Here Gibson’s profoundly ahistorical Pilate also has an important role.⁷ The Roman role here is ritually necessary and Pilate is at the center, representing an unflinching pagan masculinity and state authority well-qualified to carry out the initiation of Jesus. Gibson’s anti-Semitic depiction of the bickering treachery of the priests and the effeminate decadence of Herod disqualifies the Jewish authorities.

Condemned, Jesus is taken away and prepared for his final apotheosis. Again via the agency of the hyper-masculine Roman soldiers, he is made to “bear his cross” to the place of his execution, and is nailed to it—a process the unabridged version of the film presents unblinkingly. There Jesus lingers on the far threshold, nearly ready for the moment of aggregation, when he will rejoin the social world as the Christ. In the final minutes of the film a heretofore absent God-the-Father looks down on the tableau of Calvary and sheds a single divine tear over the death of his mortal son. The tear falls to the dusty ground and reverberates as an earthquake, and the Temple is literally split in two. Terrified, the Roman executioners hurry to end it, and thrust a spear into the side of Jesus. Satan kneels and writhes in what appears to be an erotically abject rage on the cracked and barren ground, signifying his/her defeat by the Christ victorious.

The body of Jesus is removed from the cross—savaged but still visibly muscular and male—and held across the lap of his youthful mother Mary. She is in shock, pained beyond tears, mirroring scenes of reunion between mortal mothers and mortal remains of sons enacted so many millions of times in the last century alone. In the end, Jesus emerges on cue from the tomb, reborn as the Christ. And here Gibson doesn’t bother to linger, for the resurrected Christ has achieved transcendence. He is much like the fallen soldiers upon whose particular sacrifices it is best not to dwell upon too closely, lest one disturb the delicate ideological screen that separates the *sacred* from the *meaningless*.

Conclusion

The *Passion of the Christ* is a controversial film that polarized critical responses. For its detractors it was an anti-Semitic spectacle of pornographic violence that excluded the most vital teachings in the Christian tradition. For its supporters, the violence Gibson depicted facilitated an audience member’s experience of personal suffering, allowing them to immerse themselves in the underlying ritual structure and to identify with the purposeful suffering of Jesus, at least up to a point, and celebrate his redemptive sacrifice.

Gibson’s Jesus is the obedient warrior-son, sent to do battle with the demonic enemy. Jesus is tortured and crucified so that he may be transformed from man, weak as all men are, into something more, a weapon who can lead the hosts of heaven against the powers of evil. His suffering is central to that transformation. It forged him into battle-readiness. As a boy is made into a man, made to be always vigilant against the seductive inner pull of feminine weakness and softness, steely-eyed Jesus is made into Christ, now and forever beyond its reach.

This particular Passion narrative, while grounded in long tradition, is only one of many possible and contested Passion narratives. It is however the version precisely in tune with the tensions and divisions of a culture with militarist defaults, wedded to the values of heroic masochism, in a state which at the time of its release enlisted women as (non-combat) soldiers and was widely rumored, though not yet proven beyond all possible doubt, to engage in torture. In such a context Gibson’s decision to focus on embodied masculine suffering in the film is not just an inter-

vention in the tradition of Christological depiction—though it is certainly that—but also an intervention into masculine ideals in American culture more broadly.

Heroic masochism is the key component of a style of masculinity, militarized masculinity, in which to be a man is to be fit for military service. If perhaps not quite hegemonic in Connell's terms (2005), this ethos is nonetheless extraordinarily influential, drawing aspirants eager to suffer what they must for the sake of that transformation which make them into weapons and invests them with a position of gendered privilege.

Gibson is showing us something crucial: the glorification of transformative suffering. And it is alluring in its promise: that anyone willing to pay the appropriate price in pain and humiliation can enter the exclusive club of militarized masculinity and thereby join the fight against the enemy and participate in the privileges due a valorized, toughened self. The toughened militarized self, in turn—grounded in the rejection of always-suspected (because all too human) weakness, softness, and excessive compassion—is not only authorized to inflict (transformative) pain upon others, but does so as part of militarized masculinity.

Consideration of the post-9/11 American context of production circles back to this question: why (given the ritual logics previously adumbrated) *must* Christ have been Jesus—a male? The early twenty-first century has witnessed the explosive growth of women in roles previously reserved for men, particularly the role of soldiers.⁸ The institutional separation of men from women has been threatened by feminism, by individual rights and by

the relentless logic of capitalism. It does not require a detailed knowledge of Mel Gibson's politics to see the ways in which his choices as filmmaker respond to this context.⁹

The contemporary destabilizing of the *institutionalizing* function of gendered initiation, not to mention the retreat of such rites into specialized niches, provokes movement within the transformational logics of the rite, suggesting ever-escalating ordeals. With enough suffering, Gibson's narrative seems to suggest, surely the institutional demarcation between men and women can be stabilized. It is worth noting that such a gendered politics must be played out on the bodies of men and boys, demanding an embrace of the ethos of heroic masochism.

Within this logic of gender, a real man is not, can never be truly a victim; he can be overwhelmed by superior forces, but surrender and submission is not thinkable without failure, without giving over to the seductive feminine pull of internal weakness: Gibson's Satan. It is crucial to the logic of a masculine rite of passage that the initiate be willing and not a victim, and that the candidate be worthy, able to endure the ordeal. Gibson raised the bar of the ordeal beyond comprehensibility, attempting to reauthorize proper masculinity. In this context Gibson draws on powerful cultural conventions to support his project. He knows that while there may be female persons (or androgynous men) who could be imagined to endure the tortures he depicts, qualification becomes irrelevant in the gaze of the audience. It expects to see a male initiate not just because "everyone knows" Christ is a man—the hypostatic logic and artistic tra-

dition is anything but clear on this unless we insist on gendering god—but because the post-9/11 audience would be unable to read a woman as other than a victim, and worse a victim whose heroic body might be construed as a pornographic object disqualified from heroic transcendence.

Thus, for all of the noise and heat a blind spot remains at the film's core: the presumptive necessity, one might even say goodness, of embodied male suffering. While transcendence through suffering may be the very point of Passion narratives, the Christological tradition of depiction and narrative does not require Gibson's relentless masculinization of Jesus. Arguably it is the ongoing American culture wars of the twenty-first century that make such a move both resonant and nearly invisible, particularly to the critics for whom the bloody torture depicted is pointless violence rather than purposeful suffering. I prefer not to question the depiction of suffering, but to ask why critics concede that heroic suffering is necessary, however uncomfortable they find its depiction.

Notes

¹ Even a cursory search of Google Scholar or the Library of Congress catalogue turns up dozens of monographs and essay collections focused in whole or in part on Gibson's film, including, to list only a notable few, the collection *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture and "The Passion of the Christ"* (Univ. of Chicago, 2005), edited by Timothy Beal and Tom Linafelt; sociologist Neal King's *The Passion of the Christ* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); Brent Plate's edited volume *Re-Viewing The Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and its Critics*

(Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); Zev Garber's *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy and its Implications* (Purdue University Press, 2006); Joseph Egan's *Brave Heart of Jesus: Mel Gibson's Postmodern Way of the Cross* (Columbia Press, 2005), and particularly relevant herein, David Greven's *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* (University of Texas Press, 2009), particularly chapter seven, "The Devil Wears Abjection: The Passion of the Christ." Similarly a search in the database Academic Search Complete of peer-reviewed articles that feature both "Gibson" and "Passion of the Christ" yields nearly five hundred results. To put that into perspective, a similar search for "Matrix" and "Wachowski" yields less than half that number.

² The only work I know of that deals substantively with *The Passion of the Christ* to appear in a major anthropological journal is Steven Caton's (2006) article, "Coetzee, Agamben, and the Passion of Abu Ghraib," published in *American Anthropologist*.

³ Some key exceptions are David Greven's (2009) work on *The Passion* in his *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* and Kent Brintnall's (2011) treatment in *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-in-Pain as Redemptive Figure*. David Savran's (1998) book, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*, comes too early to include *The Passion* but nonetheless addresses the relationship between male suffering and cultural forms in a powerful way

⁴ I have not differentiated the ways in which various supportive audiences—Evangelical, conservative Catholic, etc.—received the film. There are doubtless important distinctions to be made but part of the argument herein is that the overarching framework of the masculine rite of passage, in the context of ongoing American culture wars over gender ideals and militarism, provides a level of resonance that is available to critics and shared by and/or identified with by supportive audiences.

⁵ From an aesthetic point of view the way Gibson uses cinematic violence in *The Passion* is devastatingly effective. Aesthetic triumph, however, does not compensate for the anti-Semitic bigotry Gibson refuses to deflect in his telling of the Passion narrative. Given that the historical anti-Judaism that is the ancestor of murderous anti-Semitism has always been deeply imbricated in particular interpretations of the Passion story—as argued by theologian John Crossan (1995, 35)—this is a signal failure of the film.

⁶ The historical context for the inclusion of these scenes in the gospels are a separate matter, disputed by theologians and historians of religion, most likely having to do with intra-Jewish politics in the century following the crucifixion of Jesus (Crossan 1995). Such concerns, however, will barely intrude on a contemporary audience apart from a few specialists.

⁷ While there is no consensus among historians on the figure of Pilate, there is no support for Gibson's portrayal of him as a manly, sympathetic figure put upon and perhaps even intimidated by a bloodthirsty Jewish mob (Aus 1998, 139; Maclean 2007, 310).

⁸ Women have been an increasing presence in the U.S. military since the end of selective service in 1973 and they reached crucial levels of visibility in the wake of 9/11. About 10 percent of those who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, 15 percent of all active duty personnel, and 20 percent of the total U.S. armed forces, including reserves are women (Parrish 2012).

⁹ Gibson's politics, including his anti-Semitism and a form of conservative Catholicism that rejects the reforms of Vatican II, are not irrelevant to understanding *The Passion of the Christ*, but what makes the film effective for many who do not share these beliefs is the resonance of heroic suffering, the frame of the male rite of passage, and the ongoing cultural confrontation around ideal manhood and its relationship to military values.

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Responses

Passion Pruned

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Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, has been hugely popular and very controversial. Steven Gardiner provides significant insights about the appeal of "heroic masochism" in this movie, with its horror-film scenes of Jesus being tortured by ancient Romans at the urging of his fellow Jews. Gardiner finds this symptomatic of a current American ethos of "militarized masculinity," arguing that the traditional Christ narrative "does not require Gibson's relentless masculinization of Jesus." Yet in order to make this claim, Gardiner prunes Gibson's film, with its many potential viewpoints and audience identifications, into a narrow narrative lens.

Gardiner finds "a blind spot" at the film's center: "the presumptive necessity, one might even say goodness, of embodied male suffering." He argues that the "post-9/11 audience" would not accept a woman in the role of a tortured hero, Jesus here, because her body would then be victimized as a "pornographic object." But Gibson's objectifying of the body of the actor, Jim Caviezel in this film and his own in other heroic action movies, is both pornographic and transcendent depending on how it is viewed by non-believers and believers in the audience. Male and female viewers might be drawn to the eroticism of a "pretty actor . . . covered in prosthetic and/or digitally conjured

wounds," as Gardiner aptly describes him, or repulsed when flesh is ripped from that body or nails pierce its limbs. Yet Gardiner does not consider the variety of other characters onscreen, male and female, observing the objectified body of Jesus—as identification points for different movie viewers with numerous associations in their brain's "inner theatres" (Pizzato 2011).

As I have argued before, while comparing this film to medieval biblical plays through current neuroscience, along with Artaudian and Brechtian theories of the sacrificial actor, there is at least anecdotal evidence of viewers identifying with the tortured Jesus as a subject across gender, with mirror-neurons and emotional contagion evoking physical suffering in the audience (2011: 218-25). A woman in Wichita, Kansas (Peggy Scott) reportedly died from a heart attack she suffered while watching the movie. Perhaps she not only identified with the pain of Jesus, but also mimicked in her body the agony of his mother and Mary Magdalene onscreen: wiping his blood from the cobblestones after his scourging, watching him die on the cross, and cradling his corpse.

Instead of considering these female allies as viewer identification points, Gardiner focuses on the androgyny of Satan (Rosalinda Celentano) as Jesus's enemy, especially in the opening scene of temptation in the garden. Although played by a female, the Satan figure is also shown with a phallic snake crawling out from under his/her robe. After the snake crawls over his hand, Jesus rises from the ground and stomps his foot near it—"smashing the serpent's head under the heel of his sandal while staring down

the devil" (in Gardiner's view, although a smashed serpent's head is not actually shown onscreen). Satan also appears at the scourging scene as a perverse Madonna, holding an elderly-faced, anti-Christ child—perhaps as a Brechtian distancing device, raising awareness in some spectators of their own sadomasochistic pleasure in observing the bloody spectacle and nurturing its popular creativity. But Gardiner sees the Jesus-Satan rivalry throughout the film merely in terms of a militarized masculinity versus "the ugly-beautiful temptation of feminine weakness." Gardiner also terms this binary rivalry as a choice between the meaningful suffering of "heroic masochism" (which he nonetheless critiques) or a "perversion of desire, [with] pleasure in pain . . . [and] the embrace of abjection," represented by Satan's androgynous temptations.

Such masculine heroism versus feminine compassion is explored more fully in Martin Scorsese's 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It shows the militaristic desires of Judas as an anti-Roman terrorist, and of Paul as imperial preacher, against the family-man potential of Jesus beyond the cross after his mystical visions in the desert, forming a complex tragic sacrifice (Pizzato 2005). Gibson's film has a more limited focus, but Gardiner makes it seem even narrower. He presents all of *The Passion* as a "rite of passage" for Jesus from "the pre-separation anxiety of boys," paralleled by his agony in the garden, through the "liminal phase" of his scourging and crucifixion as boy-man or man-god, with the Roman torturers as "authorized agents of a transcendent and necessary ritual" to his resurrection from a cave tomb. But what is the symbolic

frame for this imaginary rite of passage and its real pain (especially real for Peggy Scott) that mirrors audience desires for a transcendent meaning to their own sufferings?

As Gardiner briefly mentions, near the end of the film "a heretofore absent God the Father looks down on the tableau of Calvary and sheds a single divine tear over the death of his mortal son." But that Father figure was also present (for believers) just off-screen in the opening Garden of Gethsemane scene, with Jesus praying to avoid the "chalice" of suffering that another part of His Godhood was demanding. For Christians, the full arc of the film's sacrifice is crucial to its transcendent meaning: God showing His love by becoming human, suffering, and dying, in order to lead people in a lifelong passage to eternal bliss.

In Gibson's film, the passion of Jesus Christ is not only an exemplary rite of passage, mirroring current American demands of masochistic masculinity for men and women soldiers (as Gardiner suggests), thus encouraging such sacrifices in real life and giving them a greater meaning. The film also prunes the neural networks of movie viewers in many other potential ways. It engages particular beliefs, associations, and identifications in each viewer, strengthening those brain circuits as others die off, according to a lifelong process of neural Darwinian sacrifice. This alters each spectator's inner theatre through Artaudian identifications with the actor's sacrifice and key moments of Brechtian distancing in the various viewpoints the film offers. These Artaudian and Brechtian options of sacrificial intimacy or critical distance involve

different camera angles, dramatic contexts, and other cinematic elements—plus each viewer’s choice in how to watch.

For example, with God the Father watching at the edges of the film like the mass audience from Gethsemane to Calvary and beyond, certain aspects of a cosmic, political, social, personal, or inner brain theatre might be evoked with Artaudian passion and Brechtian awareness. God is *not* shown looking down on Calvary, as Gardiner suggests. Instead, the movie audience is given God’s viewpoint, looking down *with* Him from above, even seeing the Calvary crosses through His tear as a lens. (This detail is not mentioned by

Gardiner.) When the tear hits the ground, as Gardiner says, it “reverberates as an earthquake” causing the Temple to be destroyed and leading to another scene of Satan in “erotically abject rage on the cracked and barren ground, signifying his/her defeat by the Christ victorious.” But this falling tear of reverberating violence, showing divine compassion for suffering and yet further destruction on earth, might be seen as caused by: (1) a sadistic or sadomasochistic streak in God or Mother Nature, (2) humankind’s original sins against God being repaired or avenged, (3) the divine battle of Christ as objectified “weapon” against Satan’s abject temptations, (4) mimetic rivalries across human cultures, from Judeo-Roman conflicts in Jesus’s time to many others since then, or (5) other associations in viewer’s inner theatres.



God’s Tear. *The Passion of the Christ*. New Market Films 2004

Gardiner simply stresses the third of these options—and that fits the melodramatic mode of clear-cut good versus evil in many Hollywood action movies. (Mel Gibson’s 2006 scandal involving a drunken anti-Semitic slur, along with the depiction of Jewish leaders in the film as more vicious than Pilate, suggests a particular combination of these options for the filmmaker also.) But even in his critique of heroic masochism as reflecting a

larger problem in American culture, Gardiner repeats its melodramatic dominance in analyzing Gibson’s film. Instead, one might explore various tragicomic (Artaudian, Brechtian, neuroscientific, and thus deeply biopolitical) meanings of sacrificial violence onscreen, replaying in the brains and lives of the mass audience—especially with Americans’ post-9/11 temptation to fight apocalyptic villains in the “Holy Land” and in the “Birthplace of Civilization” that surrounds it.

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USA

In his article, “Behold the Man: Heroic Masochism and Mel Gibson’s *Passion*,” cultural anthropologist Steven Gardiner identifies why Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* so resonated with post-9/11 audiences. Gardiner fruitfully draws upon anthropological ideas on rites of passage to frame Gibson’s film as a meditation on obtaining manhood through suffering. He finds that the film depicts a heroic masochism, a “socially desirable suffering inflicted on and accepted by men as a warrant for masculine privilege” (Gardiner 2014, 20). Finding a blind spot within the critical consensus, which has often seen the film as depicting pointless violence, Gardiner argues that *The Passion of the Christ* in fact employs the spectacle of incredible violence on the male body to cannily deflect contemporary concerns of a destabilized masculinity. By focusing on heroic masochism, however, Gardiner forecloses an understanding of the film’s vision of a militant femininity, portrayed in the androgynous, violent figure of Satan. In this response, I will offer a reading of the film that will buttress Gardiner’s reading of the strange militancy of Gibson’s Christ and his relation to executive power. At the same time, I will engage with feminist theories on women in combat to fill a blind spot in Gardiner’s account—how Gibson’s amorphously gendered Satan contains a power to nullify the purpose of the divine warrior-son’s sacrifice which the film never quite overcomes.

While Gardiner evokes the militaristic dimension of Gibson’s Jesus—via his reading of the crushing of the snake in the Garden of Gethsemane—the film pushes even further, explicitly drawing connections between the Son of God and executive leaders of the military. When Pontius Pilate pleads with the Jewish leaders to spare the man, Gibson visually links Jesus with the Roman prefect. He places them side by side, their faces often intermingling within quarter-profile shots. These compositional equivalences, which highlight the shared reddish color of their garbs, have a multivalent effect beyond absolving Pilate of responsibility in Christ’s death. Such a correlation with the Roman Empire’s representative functions to present Jesus as emblematic of a spiritual empire of his own. The link also shapes our understanding of Jesus’ dominion as a particularly militaristic one. The soldierly qualities of Gibson’s Christ become illuminated by the juxtaposition of his bloody skin against Pilate’s glistening armor, each wearing the uniform issued by their respective commander: one made of silver, the other made of flesh. The sight of Jesus on the right shoulder of a benevolent state leader whispering encouraging words while the multitudes attempt to sway his hand appears deeply imbricated within a post-9/11 moment when President George W. Bush often acknowledged God’s wisdom while calling for retribution for the attacks. In the former president’s 2011 autobiography, *Decision Points*, Bush recalls praying to himself, “Lord, let your light shine through me” before delivering a speech that intertwined pronouncements on God’s divine love with the prospect of

the nation's vengeance (Bush 146). The image of the military leader sharing the frame with Christ helps to underline the extent to which Gibson's biblical epic is not cleaved from, but is in dialogue with, a post-9/11 world—an allegorical interrelation that Gardiner very astutely highlights.

Gardiner, in his reading of the film, identifies the particularly masculine suffering of Gibson's Christ as "an intervention into masculine ideals in American culture more broadly" (Gardiner 2014, 32). When making this suggestion, Gardiner references the broader debates surrounding women in the military following the Abu Ghraib scandal. He finds that the Devil is identified for his presumed androgyny and said to "represent the seductive feminine pull of internal weakness" (*ibid.*). The underlying valence of this reading is that the film's allegorical analogue for the female soldier is the Devil. In simply conflating the feminine with weakness, however, Gardiner ignores the potential of the female soldier to undermine the notion of sacrifice as specifically masculine that sustains the militant masculinity and rites of passage Gardiner describes. I would suggest it is this power that is expressed within the Satan of the film. Early on in the film, the Devil controls a phallic snake, suggesting the potency of a feminine that co-opts the violent force of chosen warrior-sons.

The stakes for such a co-option have been well expressed within feminist studies of the discourses surrounding women in combat. Gender scholars Veronica Pin-Fat and Maria Stern, in an essay on the prevailing mass media narrative surrounding Private Jessica Lynch in the

Second Iraq War, employ Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer* who exists within a zone of indistinction, a space of sovereign exception such as the military. The individual within such a space is transformed into bare life, into a *homo sacer*, and can be destroyed since he exists in a space outside of human law as well as divine law (Pin-Fat 41). The *homo sacer* undergoes a vital evanescence, to use Gardiner's formulation, "a great emptying out of the ordinary vitality of life"; however, his very marginalized position prohibits the *homo sacer* from achieving the spiritual transcendence that is offered to Christ. Indeed the myth of sacrifice becomes crucial in hiding the root expendability of the soldier (Gardiner 2014). Pin-Fat and Stern find that women must be excluded, for this validating sacrifice is justified as occurring for the sake of a domestic space tied inextricably to femininity. Female soldiers risk undermining the very possibility of meaningful sacrifice as they show that the "the masculinity of the military, indeed the existential identity of the military as part of war, relies on this constitutive other" (Pin-Fat 35). They find that "the sacrifice of military women threatens to reveal the very impossibility of sacrificing military men. Thus, the meaning for which sovereign power kills the life takers disintegrates" (Pin-Fat 44).

Gardiner points out that in the political realm the "door is open to libertarian and individualistic logics allowing a woman to fill normatively masculine roles, most quintessentially soldierly roles" but I would argue that via the androgynous figure of the devil, the film engages in these logics with more nuance and depth than the article suggests (Gardiner 2014,

23). Pin-Fat and Stern's suggestion demonstrates that women fighting in war represent a threat that cannot simply be elided by women fulfilling the "quintessentially soldier roles," as Gardiner writes (*ibid.*). Indeed, engaging with Pin-Fat and Stern highlights the very obliterating possibility of Satan within the film, whose muddled gender identity may push Jesus to contemplate that his own sacrifice may lack an overarching purpose. In stomping upon the Devil's snake, a display of "manly violence deployed with surgical precision in the rejection of androgyny," Jesus rebukes the possibility. Strangely, Gibson's staging of the scene, where Jesus is tearful and frightened until he faces the demonic presence, suggests that violence is itself a balm against his existential fear. By having to squash Satan with manly force, the film posits that the demon represents not feminine weakness, but the possibility of a feminine violent strength. Under this framework, a woman could not be in Christ's tortured position, which allows him to achieve a heroic transcendence—not just because post-9/11 audiences might conceive such a female body as a "pornographic object" like Gardiner asserts, but because such an individual would invalidate the very possibility of sacrificial masculinity (Gardiner 2014, 33).

Gardiner gestures towards the ideological tension at the heart of the film when he compares the fleeting vision of Christ's resurrection with how little the living explore the sacrifice of fallen soldiers. He finds that particularities of their sacrifices are not delved into, "lest one disturb the delicate ideological screen that separates the sacred from the mean-

ingless" (Gardiner 2014, 31). At the end of this response, it may be worth lingering on the brief scene of a Christ reborn to underline the surprising complexities of Gibson's film. As light stretches across the cave, the camera pans on the profile of a perfect, unmarred Jesus. The film then cuts to a close up of his face, his eyes looking up as though he sees the divine redemption that awaits. Had this been the final shot, the film would have simply reinforced a masculine vision. However, he rises up. What comes fully into view is a more enigmatic image: Christ's naked groin obscured by his hand which now features a gaping hole. The final interweaving of the literal phallus with the metaphorical vaginal opening of his hand suggests a Christ figure that remains corporeally damaged, even though he has been resurrected. Gibson literalizes the possibility of femininity on such a militant hero as a void, becoming figuratively unrepresentable. The compositional androgyny constructed within this final image of a Christ ascendant functions to reinscribe tropes traditionally coded as feminine back on to the hypermasculine body of the Christ figure. Christ takes on an androgyny here, but such an image is only possible after the violence has been rendered. By way of Jesus' masculinity and Satan's femininity, such a state is rendered impossible for women, precisely because the film indicates that they stand outside of the rites of passage, the very violence necessary to achieve vital evanescence. At the same time, the literal void in the God bespeaks a weakness, a masculinity rendered fragile. Could then the film's very lack of closure suggest that meaninglessness exists within the sacred

purpose given to the obedient warrior sons of the nation? Here, in the film's quintessential representation of its "rather brutal gendered politics imagined on the male body," does the film allude to the disruptive force of the warrior-daughter on the myth of sacrifice (Gardiner 2014, 23)? Gardiner's essay encourages us to probe this final image of irresolution—his essay opens the way to find subtlety and self-contradiction in a film whose ambivalences can be lost in the overwhelming spectacle that is the "main event" of its violence.

Works Cited

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