

# The Passion of *The Passion* – Return of the Public Spectacle?

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## **Summary**

This article analyses presentations of violence in relation to historically specific regimes of truth. It suggests that Mel Gibson's film provides for an easy slippage between different orders of violence and truth, creating the possibility for the tortured body denuded of any relation to truth, to appear as sacrifice.

## **Opsomming**

Hierdie artikel analiseer voorstellings van geweld met betrekking tot histories spesifieke regimes van waarheid. Dit suggereer dat Mel Gibson se film voorsiening maak vir 'n maklike verskuiwing tussen die verskillende ordes van geweld en waarheid, wat die moontlikheid skep dat die gefolterde liggaam, ontbloot van enige verband met die werklikheid, as slagoffer voorkom.

Misgivings about and critiques of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* have focused mainly on two factors: its anti-semitic assumptions and the show of excessive violence. It is on the latter issue that I would like to focus in this article. However, my engagement with this aspect of the film is not motivated by an abhorrence of violence in the interests of the gentle arts of punishment. The attempt to ground an ethics would inevitably have to face the question of violence at the external limits of a social order.<sup>1</sup>

It is the mode of presenting violence, its movement in relation to the movement of desire, and its relation to truth within historically different orders of knowledge, that are at issue in the analysis of the film that I would like to undertake here.

To the images of the tortured, tormented body presented in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, I would like to juxtapose two others. However, I will refrain from visually presenting them here. For I believe that there are good reasons not to work with images in this case; there are good reasons for being iconoclastic about the presentation of the passion of Christ.

## The Public Spectacle of Torture and Execution

The first image that I would like to post alongside Mel Gibson's vision of the passion of Christ, is in fact not dissimilar in the content of the images presented, the kinds of tortures exacted, the kinds of statements extracted, and the kinds of affirmations of earthly and divine kingdoms rendered. Consider this description:

Damiens the Regicide, condemned to death on the scaffold in 1757, was made to undergo the most horrible tortures. At intervals, he made vows to God and statements to the confessors: "My God, have pity on me! Jesus, help me!" In the account of the torture and execution of Damiens the Regicide, given by Monsieur Bouton, an officer of the watch, we learn about the sequence of statements of the condemned man in the course of his torture:

Monsieur le Breton, the clerk of the court, went up to the patient several times and asked him if he had anything to say. He said he had not; at each torment, he cried out, as the damned in hell are supposed to cry out, "Pardon, my God! Pardon, Lord!" ... Monsieur le Breton went up to him again and asked him if he had anything to say; he said no. Several confessors went up to him and spoke to him at length; he willingly kissed the crucifix that was held out to him; he opened his lips and repeated: "Pardon, Lord." .... The confessors returned and spoke to him again. He said to them (I heard him): "Kiss me, gentlemen." The parish priest of St Paul's did not dare to, so Monsieur de Marsilly slipped under the rope holding the left arm and kissed him on the forehead. The executioners gathered round and Damiens told them not to swear, to carry out their task, and that he did not think ill of them; he begged them to pray to God for him, and asked the parish priest of St Paul's to pray for him at first mass.

(Foucault [1975]1982: 4-5)

[These statements extracted under torture closely resemble those recorded in the Gospels of Jesus Christ's last hours.]

Torture here functions as a ceremonial of truth. From the punished body, the truth is to be extorted. Punishment and investigation converge on the body in pain. The guilty man proclaiming his own condemnation has to confirm the truth of what he has been charged with:

[T]he procession through the streets, the placard attached to his back, chest or head as a reminder of the sentence; the halts at various crossroads, the reading of the sentence; the *amende honorable* performed at the doors of churches, in which the condemned man solemnly acknowledged his crime; ... whether he was to go

simply to the pillory or to the stake and the wheel, the condemned man published his crime and the justice that had been meted out to him by bearing them physically on his body.

(Foucault [1975]1982: 43)

The public execution was seen as the moment of truth, as the justification of justice. In most cases, a mimetic relation was established between crime and punishment or the crime and the mode of execution. “Thus justice had the crime re-enacted before the eyes of all, publishing it in its truth and at the same time annulling it in the death of the guilty man” (Foucault [1975]1982: 45).

Signs of truth established and justice done were sought particularly in the dying moments of the condemned man – at the juncture between the judgement of men and the judgement of God, visible to the entire populace attending the public execution. In this respect, the public execution – even the public execution of Louis XI in 1792 – remained true to the logic of sacrifice, which is defined by a close relation to the sacred.

### **Naked Man – Bare Life**

Compare this to the images that we have seen flashing across our TV screens in news broadcasts and on front pages of newspapers more or less contemporary with the appearance of Gibson’s film on the movie circuit. Ferocious violence and mutilation are enacted on faceless bodies in the no citizens’ lands of reconfigured geopolitical power arrangements, in prisons and ghettos where the sovereign power to let live and make die holds sway. The globalised world is tendentially divided into life-zones and death-zones – a division frequently reproduced within the boundaries of a single country or city (Balibar 2002: 17, 20, 21). Life is rendered bare in the death zones. The naked man, stripped of social and cultural markers, denuded of economic, social, civil, and political rights, is made to appear in images of abject, obscene nakedness, in front of armoured bodies of military might. The horrors evoked by these images are not devoid of the attraction and fascination that come with voyeurism, arising from the sense of power to be gained from inflicting excessive violence, pain, and death.<sup>2</sup>

The power gained from excessive violence, pain, and death figured in visual images produces no consensus, no shared experience. In this case, in Susan Sontag’s words, “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (2004: 7). It is for these latter-day media images that I would want to reserve Sontag’s verdict of moral indifference:

No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching.

(Sontag 2004: 40)

I would say that Gibson's portrayal of Christ's torture and suffering keys into both types of images. It is construed closely along the lines of the first image of punishment and torture as public spectacle, in which the truth of the law and the justifiability of justice are written onto the body of the condemned man. Gibson's film relentlessly exposes the humiliated, denuded body to torture. A mimetic relation to violence is created through the immobilisation and stabilisation of successive violent acts as the most significant moments in the visual plot.<sup>3</sup> In the process, the images of violence become self-serving, unmoored from a relation to a regime of truth. In that respect, it is the second image of the punishment of torture, soliciting immobile, "unmoved" fascination, that takes over the organisation of the spectacle.

### **The Historical Difference that Separates the Society of the Spectacle from Bare Life**

I would want to say something more, however – something by way of a critical perspective on this film. In order to be able to do that, I will have to show what separates the first portrayal of suffering under torture from the second portrayal of the human body reduced to bare life, denuded of cultural, social, and civic interpellations.

What separates them is, of course, a historical difference. That historical difference comes with a difference in how we think about human subjectivity, in how we think of the "perfectibility of wo/man" and her/his capacity of acting as a responsible citizen who can regulate her-/himself, and in how society thinks it has to deal with those instances in which socialisation, discipline, and self-regulation have failed. The historical difference also means a difference in how the power over life and death is being wielded, and who wields it. It means a difference in the organisation of knowledge, in the way in which what is visible is separated from what is invisible. It means a difference in the relation between the tragic and sense – between "pure tragedy" as fulfilment of sense commanding pathos and passion, and nonsignifying, unspeakable suffering devoid of pathos or passion (cf. Nancy 1997: 146, 149). Finally, it means different ideas about aesthetics and representation, and about the role of art, literature, and theatre in society.

In relation to punishment, specifically, this historical difference means that torture as a ceremonial, as a public spectacle, has largely disappeared (or has

it?), and with it, the body as a primary target of redemptive punishment. What had contributed to the disappearance of torture and execution as a public spectacle is a reversal of roles: by a logic peculiar to the accursed and the sacred, the executioner came to resemble the violent criminal to be executed, and the criminal became the object of pity, if not a saint.

### **Theatre as Moral Institution**

However, the disappearance of violence enacted on the body in a public spectacle is not simply an event in the history of crime, punishment, and the prison. It is part of a modern order of knowledge, of a modern understanding of the relationship between the state, society, and the individual, and of a modern aesthetic. A great deal of aesthetic, moral, and political theory went into the project of educating modern man as a citizen. It centrally involved taming the death instinct visualised by Enlightenment philosophers in terms of war and spectacles of violence, and internalising sources of authority previously held by agencies external to the individual. The philosophers and writers of the Enlightenment recognise the power of the spectator, who becomes the site of a moral disposition to be cultivated. Convinced – probably by the effects of public spectacles of punishments – that human beings can get involved in the suffering of other human beings merely by watching, Kant contemplates the events of the French Revolution. He emphasises the importance of a socioethical revolution over and above that of a political revolution. In the process, he shifts the focus from the political actors to the (moral) spectators:

This event [of our time, i.e. the French Revolution] consists neither in momentous deeds nor crimes committed by men whereby what was great among men is made small or what was small is made great .... No, nothing of the sort. It is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself publicly in this game of great revolutions, and manifests such a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on the one side against those on the other .... [T]his revolution ... finds in the hearts of all spectators a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race.  
(Kant [1798] 1979: 153)

What for Kant is important in the Revolution is

what takes place in the heads [and hearts] of those who do not make it, who are not its principal actors; it is the relationship that they themselves have with that Revolution of which they are not the active agents.

(Foucault 1988: 92)

Kant thus redirects the gaze of the spectators from the spectacle being enacted to a theatre or narrative to be represented. A similar move can be observed in Diderot's vision of re-channelling the "fury" of the populace – a vision that is roughly contemporary with that of Kant.

"Why is the populace attracted to executions?", asks the narrator of Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*. Not because of being inhuman, the narrator explains, but out of sympathy with the man to be executed:

The man in the street goes to the Place de Grève so that he can *see* something which he can in turn *tell to others* in his suburb. Whatever the scene it does not matter, just so long as it *gives him a role to play, makes his neighbours gather round him, and makes them listen to him*. Put on some exciting festival on the boulevard and you will see that the place of execution will be empty. The populace is *hungry for something to look at* and goes there because *it enjoys seeing it* and even more *enjoys telling others about it* afterward. The populace is terrible in its fury but that does not last long. Its own poverty has made it *compassionate* and it turns its eyes away from the spectacle of horror which it has gone to see, *[it] is moved to pity and goes home crying*.

(Diderot [1796] 1986: 164; my italics)

Seeing something to be able to tell one's neighbours, giving people a role to play, turning fury into pity and compassion – this becomes integral to the Kantian idea of the moral subject, giver of the law to which s/he is subject.<sup>4</sup> It centrally involved transferring the public spectacle of violent punishment onto the stage. Theatre, in Enlightenment political and aesthetic thought, becomes a moral institution.

The theatre does not, however, entirely shake off its heritage of the logic of sacrifice. In a mythical account of the emergence of theatre, the sacrifice of the goat served to bind the group together through the killing and devouring of the totem animal, and the shared guilt that provides the primal social tie. Theatre enacts this primal social tie in each new instance. The theatre recuperates the primal group. In modernity, it is the place where man is led to perform a task of the group upon himself. And that centrally includes the taming of the death instinct.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that European political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been described in terms of theatre. Both actors and spectators insisted on the description of the French Revolution in terms of theatre, stage, and performance, in a play about "the nation", and

“the people”. Robespierre himself summed up the events of 10 August 1792 (that is, the fall of the monarchy and the imprisonment of the royal family), as a play in which the people appear with passionate, vengeful force. A contemporary aesthetic theorist, Georg Forster, claims that the Revolution performs itself (cf. Kurz 1992: 143). In 1839, German writer Heinrich Heine envisages world history as theatre. In his play *Dantons Tod* [The Death of Danton] (1835), German playwright Georg Büchner presents a critique of the theatricality of the French revolutionaries’ attempts at reviving classical antiquity. Extending this critique, Karl Marx (1852) describes the rise of Louis Napoleon as a farce repeating the enactment of a classical tragedy by Robespierre in the French Revolution and its aftermath ([1852]1979: 103-104).<sup>5</sup>

## Media and Shock Experiences

It is interesting to compare this with the similes with which present-day spectators describe the unassimilable in the context of an ever-increasing flow of information about the agonies of war and calamities. Common responses to, and eyewitness accounts of, the events of September 11 can be summed up in this statement: It was “unreal”, “surreal”, “like a movie” (Sontag 2004: 22). Latter-day media presentations of calamities and suffering generate the shock experience described by Walter Benjamin (by reference to Freud’s essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920)). However, shock is not just the result of watching human suffering, or watching a particular kind of human suffering (for Benjamin, this took the form of automation, assembly-line working conditions, urban crowds):<sup>6</sup> it is equally produced by the very form of the modern media (for Benjamin information, entertainment, photography and film).<sup>7</sup> Benjamin describes the shock experience in terms of various forms of reproducible images whose immediacy destroys the conditions of the aesthetic medium. The media age has all the means at its disposal for an orchestrated mass-scale visibility of violence. Scenes of violence, and the media technology of their dissemination destroy the possibility of *Erfahrung*, of involuntary (unconscious) memory,<sup>8</sup> of fantasy, and of narrative; they do not enter tradition; and they engender isolation. By the same token, they preclude the possibility that elements from the individual past may combine with material from the collective past (cf. Benjamin [1939] 1999: 156).

This account suggests that the shock experience that characterises modernity, temporarily or continuously suspends the divided psychic apparatus, causing a collapse of the divisions between the psychic agencies. In the grip of a shock experience, “the *protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function of the living organism than *reception* of stimuli” (Freud [1920]1985:

299). The organism sets in motion every possible defensive measure, primarily through making the conscious system act as a shield, leaving all other psychical systems impoverished or paralysed in the process (Freud [1920] 1985: 301-302).

However, a divided psychic apparatus, with the three agencies of the super-ego, the ego, and the id in place and in conflict with one another, is a condition for individual and collective memory (including forgetting); for acting in accordance with internalised norms and values; for creating and maintaining the social bond; and for keeping potentially violent responses at bay.

### **Return of the Spectacle?**

Returning to the question posed in the title and at the outset of my argument, then, I would say that the film *The Passion of the Christ* does, indeed, present a return to the public spectacle of pre-modern forms of punishment, torture, and execution. However, it does so under radically altered mediating conditions. It presents some version of the well-known story of the passion of Christ at the level of content, without being able to assimilate the content into its own structuring conditions. As a result, it cannot create or consolidate the social bond that is typically bolstered with suffering as sacrifice and guilt. It cannot recreate the space of the public spectacle, and of the theatre. It cannot sublimate the passion solicited by the public spectacle into empathy and compassion. It cannot mobilise aesthetic judgement for a *sensus communis*. Its spectators are left in their seats in the dark and in isolation, with their energies sapped by the shock experience of the movie. Leaving the spectator in passive captivity, it cannot hold out the mould of a moral citizen.

All these things that the movie cannot do should not blind us to its possible pernicious effects, though. The film *The Passion of the Christ* flattens a founding public spectacle encoded in layers of textuality and interpretation. It purports to render a public spectacle of social, political and religious import legible through moving images projected onto a screen. The easy sliding between the public of public executions, and the privatised, atomised movie spectatorship, suggests that media technologies can serve to create ritualised public spaces. Just as entire church congregations booked entire movie houses to watch *The Passion of the Christ*, religious worship could from now on take the form of showing movies. It is not hard to imagine, along these lines of relitainment, movie theatres being turned into places of religious worship – a perversion facilitated by late-capitalist media culture. In the box-office countdowns, the movie ranks as an absolute hit, as reported by a news brief of Sunday, 11 April 2004:



THE PASSION OF THE PASSION – RETURN OF THE PUBLIC SPECTACLE?

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* reclaimed the top box-office spot over the Easter weekend. Christian moviegoers, looking to make a first or second viewing of the crucifixion drama part of their holy week, helped *The Passion* net another \$17.1 million over the weekend. With \$354.8 million earned so far, the movie is now the eighth most popular flick on the all-time U.S. chart, and clearly the biggest Aramaic language film in history.

(<http://www.c-ville.com/www.archives/2004/04-13-2004/asp/3.asp>)

The passion of the flesh is finished, its nudity exposed. Torn from sacred texts, it is devoid of pathos, meaning, and reason. The passion of the Christ is stripped of passion. There is nothing left to say – is that the secret of the strangely disembedded Aramaic language, the displaced neo-Latinisms, the atrophied English subtitles, and the complete absence of the Greek text of the Gospels? Instead of confronting this senseless suffering, and with it, the suffering sense, the film sacralises the denuded tortured body exposed to cinematic voyeurism. In effacing distinctions of genre, orders of knowledge, psychosocial organisation and social imaginary, the film assimilates the image of the publicly tortured body of the man condemned in the name of truth, to that of the tortured naked body of the man denuded of any relation to truth. In assimilating these figures to one another, the danger is that the body as ground zero of experience, as life stripped bare, will be justified and hallowed as sacrifice.

## Notes

1. An “ethics of violence” is not a contradiction in terms. Georges Sorel states this clearly – in words that we might also have found in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, or Walter Benjamin:

There are so many legal precautions against violence and our education is directed towards so weakening our tendencies towards violence that we are instinctively inclined to think that any act of violence is a manifestation of a return to barbarism .... It may be asked whether there is not a little stupidity in the admiration of our contemporaries for gentle methods; I see, in fact, that several authors, remarkable for their perspicacity and their interest in the ethical side of every question, do not seem to have the same fear of violence as our official professors.

(Sorel [1920]1999: 175, 176)

2. One of the more recent examples of such horror and its fascination has been exposed by Susan Sontag in her essay “Regarding the Torture of Others” in the *New York Times* of 23 May 2004. See <http://www.nytimes.com.2004/05/23/-magazine/23PRISONS.html>.

3. See Bersani & Dutoit 1985: 52. The authors contrast this with the relation of narrative to sculpted images of violence in the Assyrian palace reliefs of the ninth century BC. By tracing the lines of perpetual visual mobility in these reliefs, they show how “we find ourselves engaged in perceptual moves which undo narrative organization and prohibit a fascination with the violent stories of Assyrian history” (1985: 14; for a psychoanalytic explanation of the relation between primary and secondary processes in the mobility of desire and vision, see also pp. 122-123).
4. This idea closely resonates with Rousseau’s vision:  
Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet: let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the other so that all will be better united.  
(Rousseau [1758]1968: 126)
5. [T]he famous passages of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* read as follows:  
Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as [a miserable] farce.  
(Marx [1852]1979: 103)

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured guise and this borrowed language.

(Marx [1852]1979: 103-104)

[T]he revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire .... Camille Desmoulins, Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Napoleon, the heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of unchaining and setting up modern *bourgeois* society .... The new social formation once established, the antediluvian Colossi disappeared and with them resurrected Romanity – the Brutuses, Gracchi, Publicolas, the tribunes, the senators, and Caesar himself .... Wholly absorbed in the production of wealth and in peaceful competitive struggle, it no longer comprehended that ghosts from the days of Rome had watched over its cradle. But unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and battles of peoples

to bring it into being. And in the classically austere traditions of the Roman Republic its gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to maintain their passion on the high plane of the great historical tragedy.

(Marx [1852]1979: 104)

6. “The shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker ‘experiences’ at his machine” (Benjamin [1939]1999: 173). The man in the crowd and the man at the machine are, according to Benjamin, automatons who have liquidated their memories ([1939]1999: 174).
7. “In the film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle .... That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film” (Benjamin [1939] 1999: 171).
8. In this verdict, Benjamin relies on Freud’s account of traumatic excitations and their effects. For Freud, becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system: “[T]he excitatory process becomes conscious in the system *cs.* but leaves no permanent trace behind there; but the excitation that is transmitted to the systems lying next to it leaves its traces.” (Freud [1920]1985: 296) In such a case, consciousness arises instead of a memory trace. Excitatory processes expire in the process of becoming conscious. Consciousness as such receives no memory traces. The more consciousness has to act as a protective shield against shock, the less will impressions enter into experience (*Erfahrung*). Instead, they will remain restricted to a momentary registration (*Erlebnis*) (Freud [1920] 1985: 296-297, 157).

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