

The Passion of the Christ: Behind the Mask of Violence

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Summary

The film *The Passion of the Christ* is discussed in terms of its possible provocative and hidden messages in the service of particular interest groups and political alliances. Violence is viewed as persuasive communication, and the possible psychological effects of such a search for power and dominance are illustrated.

Opsomming

Die film *The Passion of the Christ* word bespreek aan die hand van die moontlike provokerende en verborge boodskappe in diens van besondere belangegroepes en politieke alliansies. Geweld word as oorreringskommunikasie beskou, en moontlike sielkundige gevolge van só 'n soeke na mag en dominansie word geïllustreer.

The Passion of the Christ: Behind the Mask of Violence

Many audience members have commented on the extreme violence which is depicted in the film *The Passion of the Christ*. Narratives of Christianity, Judaism and Islam provide pre-existing frameworks of meaning for the interpretation of such a film, and viewers have therefore been primed to be provoked and perturbed in certain ways. The violence in the film is languaged, given meaning, and may have the intensity to disrupt or strengthen social meaning and relations.

Violence may be defined as “a significant event of empirical behaviour of groups or individuals that causes measurable damage or death to others” (Thornton 1995:1). Violent acts result in a wide range of individual, social and economic problems and trauma that affect well-being and mental and physical health. Life may be lost, family life disrupted, large groups displaced, and trauma induced at all levels of existence. In addition to such demonstrable outcomes, the meanings attributed to violence and its results give rise to submission, illusions of power, fear, outrage, and so on. Images and narratives about experienced and perceived violence contribute to the traumatic effects of violence. The behavioural and emotional effects of violence, and the extent to which incisive change occurs after an act of violence, are the results of how

people talk about and interpret violence and its patterns of preceding and succeeding events.

Clearly then, violence may serve as a form of persuasive communication. Violence may be an indicator “for an entire ecology of relationships” (Keeney 1983: 124), and a violent act provides communication to and about the social context in which it occurs (Keeney 1983). The violence in the Gibson film about the last days of the Christ may be a potent medium for altering or maintaining meaning in the narrative blueprints for life and world maps of viewers. Mel Gibson may be suspected of using violence to influence and even control the minds and memories of viewers. The film has evoked a wide range of responses and experiences. Some viewers were provoked to see offensive torture, exaggerated and sustained violence, explicit or implicit anti-Semitism, while others were transformed into realising the love of a God and fellow human beings.

A Communicative Compromise

If the violence in the film is viewed as a metaphor for a complex ecology of relationships and contexts, an “as if” scenario is represented in Figure 1.

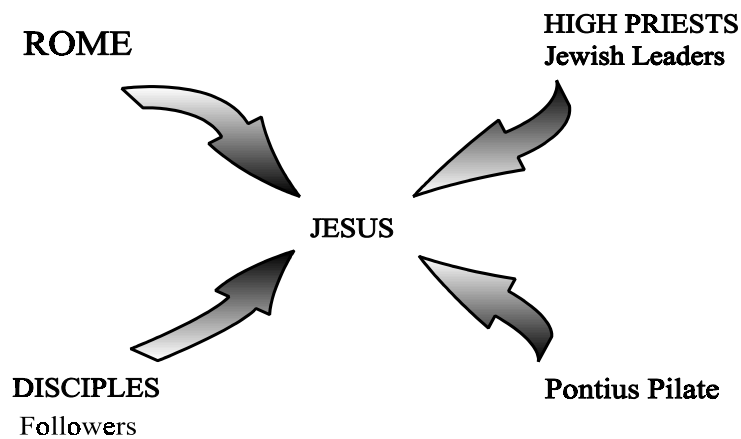


Figure 1: Jesus As Metaphor of a Complex Relational Ecology

A communicative compromise existed in that the various role players needed a medium through which to express their intense emotions and agendas without resorting to open warfare against other parties – in the film the Romans, Jewish priests, oppressed citizens of Israel, and the disciples all expressed their hostility towards other role players involved. *The eventual death of Jesus probably gave a measure of expression and satisfaction to each of the involved parties, but none of them really got what they wanted.* The negotiations around the death of Jesus may be viewed as the public content of more obscure battles for one-upmanship behind the scenes. The landscape of sociopolitical relations at the time of the crucifixion is sketched by Gibson in his film, and by reviewers such as Hornaday (2004), Millikan (2004), Scott (2004), and Walsh (2004).

Jesus is depicted as the “identified patient” or central figure; the person who suffers, who is sacrificed and tortured as a metaphor which obscures many complex social relations. Imagine the intense differences and contradictions among important role players such as the Roman imperialists, the high priests and Jewish leaders, the oppressed citizens of the conquered territory, and the unenviable position of Pontius Pilate, who is presented as having to pacify the oppressed, satisfy his Roman masters, and who was at loggerheads with his superiors in Rome. Such hostile relations were obscured behind the fascination with the actions and processes surrounding the Jesus phenomenon. These politically and interpersonally hostile and mutually negating social relations cried out for some communicative compromise for the expression of intense emotions and powerful agendas, while at the same time obscuring the actual social relations which were brittle and in danger of exploding. Enter the scapegoat, a man who successfully created a troublesome organisation of disciples and followers. The revolutionary power tactics of Jesus are creatively described by Haley (1969). This leader who amassed a lot of power by organising the poor and the disconfirmed, came to serve as a useful scapegoat for Rome, the Jewish leaders, Pontius Pilate, and even some of his own disciples. The sociopolitical and economic realities of the time cried out for a valve to let off increasingly volatile emotions and discontent. Variables of importance were the Roman imperialists, heavy taxes, terrible poverty, exploitation by the priestly hierarchy, the conservative rich, the strict and exclusive religious organisation of the Jews, and so on.

The Film as Instrument of Power

A Brief Introduction to Mel Gibson

Mel Gibson was born in New York, United States of America, in 1956, the sixth of eleven children born to his parents. When Mel was twelve, his father, Hutton Gibson, emigrated to Australia to help his sons avoid the draft. Gibson senior is a leading figure in the Alliance for Catholic Tradition, an ultra-conservative group which has opposed the official Catholic church for years. Hutton is a holocaust denier who views the Vatican as a vacuum, and the Pope as illegitimate. One of the main reasons for his antipathy to mainstream Catholicism is one specific resolution of the Second Vatican Council of the mid 1960's which absolved the Jewish people of responsibility for the death of Christ. Hutton Gibson refers to the Vatican as a "Masonic plot backed by the Jews" (Walsh 2004: 1).

In his interpretation of the last days of Christ, Mel Gibson leaned heavily on *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, an older version of the passion of the Christ by Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824), a German Augustinian nun who was described as a "mystic and anti-semite" (Hornaday 2004: 1). This work added sadistic elements to Biblical accounts of the story of Christ, and referred to the Jewish mob as "cruel, wicked, and hard-hearted" (Walsh 2004: 2). The lead actor in the contemporary *Passion of the Christ* is another devout Catholic who suggested that he was "called" to play the role of Jesus in the film (Walsh 2004).

Mel Gibson screened the rough cut of the film to right-wing thinkers like Peggy Noonan of *The Wall Street Journal*, Kate O'Beirne of *The National Review*, Linda Chavez of Fox News Channel, and David Kuo, deputy-director of George W. Bush's "faith-based initiative" (Walsh 2004: 6). Silk (2004) and Walsh (2004) provided convincing arguments to highlight Gibson's attempts at manipulating the media and drumming up right-wing support for his film, and Silk (2004) hypothesised about Gibson's "ecclesiastical agenda to bring the church back to a traditionalist understanding of what it was before Vatican II" (Silk 2004: 6). The association with conservative role players stem from this implicit aim.

Violence as Perturbing Medium

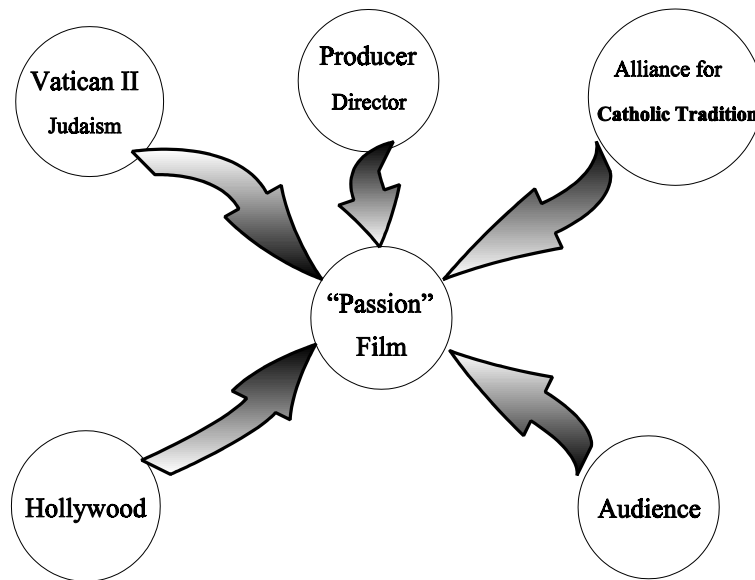


Figure 2: The Film Obscuring Multiple Agendas

From Figure 2 some important role players may be identified, and the reader may infer the power relations obscured by the *The Passion of the Christ* as a metaphor for a complex ecology of relationships among, for example, the Alliance of Catholic Tradition, the Vatican, Judaism, Hollywood, the worldwide sets of audiences, and so on. For example, in the film the Roman officials are seen to bow to the demands of the Jewish leaders, to avoid a possible uprising. Eventually Pilate is seen to appease the Jewish mob by authorising the execution of Jesus. The hostility within the ranks of the disciples, the Jewish high priests' fear of a revolutionary leader (Jesus), the unenviable position of Pilate trapped between the demands of Rome, the appeals of the Jews, and the agenda of his own wife – all of these micropolitical struggles frame the demand for a scapegoat towards the release of serious tension and pressure. It can only be imagined how incisive such a film can be in its facilitation of the real instrument of power, that is, *persuasion*. Elsewhere in this article Gibson's attempts at persuasion have been reviewed.

From time to time the author of this brief article teaches in the midwest region of the USA, and the deep resentment and even paranoia of large groups

of people and social layers towards globalisation, the rights of minorities, and liberal values have become apparent as a nodal social characteristic of the area. Americans and Christians are seen in the context of a hostile international system, and these people feel ignored internally within the USA, and persecuted in general. Evangelical Christianity grows rapidly in this area, serves to counter general confusion, and provides a home to many in the USA. Consider the disruptive changes of the past few decades: the decline of industrial and entire regions in the midwest, discontinuities introduced by globalisation and computerisation, the decline of traditional small-town America, changes in family life as well as religious affiliation and union membership, decisions taken over the heads of the voters (war, elimination of the welfare state, scrapping of essential services), and so on. In a discussion of the “marginal personality” (Walsh 2004: 7), it is contended that individuals and groups to the right of the American political continuum feel persecuted and disconfirmed by world and European trends. From this perspective Americans and Christians face a hostile world, and the events of September 11 confirmed this perception. The so-called “axis of evil” has to be defeated (Walsh 2004: 7)! The perception exists that the politics of America are far removed from the alienated masses. People feel abandoned, oppressed, and paralysed. It is against this background that voters returned George W. Bush to the presidency, and that Gibson may have tried to amplify these voices by means of his persuasive film and compelling cinematic images. The covert messages of the film could be linked to the perceived unheard voices of the ultra-right who see “America as whipped and persecuted, by terrorists, and by the ungrateful and vengeful Pharisees, the French and the Germans” (Walsh 2004: 9).

The Effects of Violence: Power Behind the Mask

The violence in the film may result in severe psychological consequences and experiences of disruption as a result of two factors in interaction (Sluzki 1993):

- A relationship or reality of protection or trust may be inverted, suddenly and unpredictably, into a context of terror or fear for the audience member, and
- this transformation may happen in a situation of mystification and ambiguity.

For example, the graphic depictions of torture and violence may result in people of faith questioning God’s mercy, feeling terrorised in a context of mystification and ambiguity concerning the agenda of such a cruel God. This

two-factor crisis may lead to various types of traumatising, ranging from cognitive dissonance to severe symptoms of stress and terror. Ambiguous situations tend to get filled with meaning, and this is the dynamic which enables persuasive communicators to spread their beliefs and messages, intentionally or by default. In this sense, *The Passion* film may be viewed as extremely potent and provocative.

Conclusion

After September 11 and the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, there has been noticeable amplification of propaganda and polarising messages by all the role players in the war and terrorism drama. *The Passion of the Christ* may be viewed as a potent communicational device serving the hidden agendas of some of these powerful groups and alliances in the search for unilateral power and dominance.

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