

THE CRITICS



THE CURRENT CINEMA

NAILED

Mel Gibson's *"The Passion of the Christ."*

BY DAVID DENBY

In "The Passion of the Christ," Mel Gibson shows little interest in celebrating the electric charge of hope and redemption that Jesus Christ brought into the world. He largely ignores Jesus' heart-stopping eloquence, his startling ethical radicalism and personal radiance—Christ as a "paragon of vitality and poetic assertion," as John Updike described Jesus' character in his essay "The Gospel According to Saint Matthew." Cecil B. De Mille had his version of Jesus' life, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Martin Scorsese had theirs, and Gibson, of course, is free to skip over the incomparable glories of Jesus' temperament and to devote himself, as he does, to Jesus' pain and martyrdom in the last twelve hours of his life. As a viewer, I am equally free to say that the movie Gibson has made from his personal obsessions is a sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood, and agony—and to say so without indulging in "anti-Christian sentiment" (Gibson's term for what his critics are spreading). For two hours, with only an occasional pause or gentle flashback, we watch, stupefied, as a handsome, strapping, at times half-naked young man (James Caviezel) is slowly tortured to death. Gibson is so thoroughly fixated on the scourging and crushing of Christ, and so meagrely involved in the spiritual meanings of the final hours, that he falls in danger of altering Jesus' message of love into one of hate.

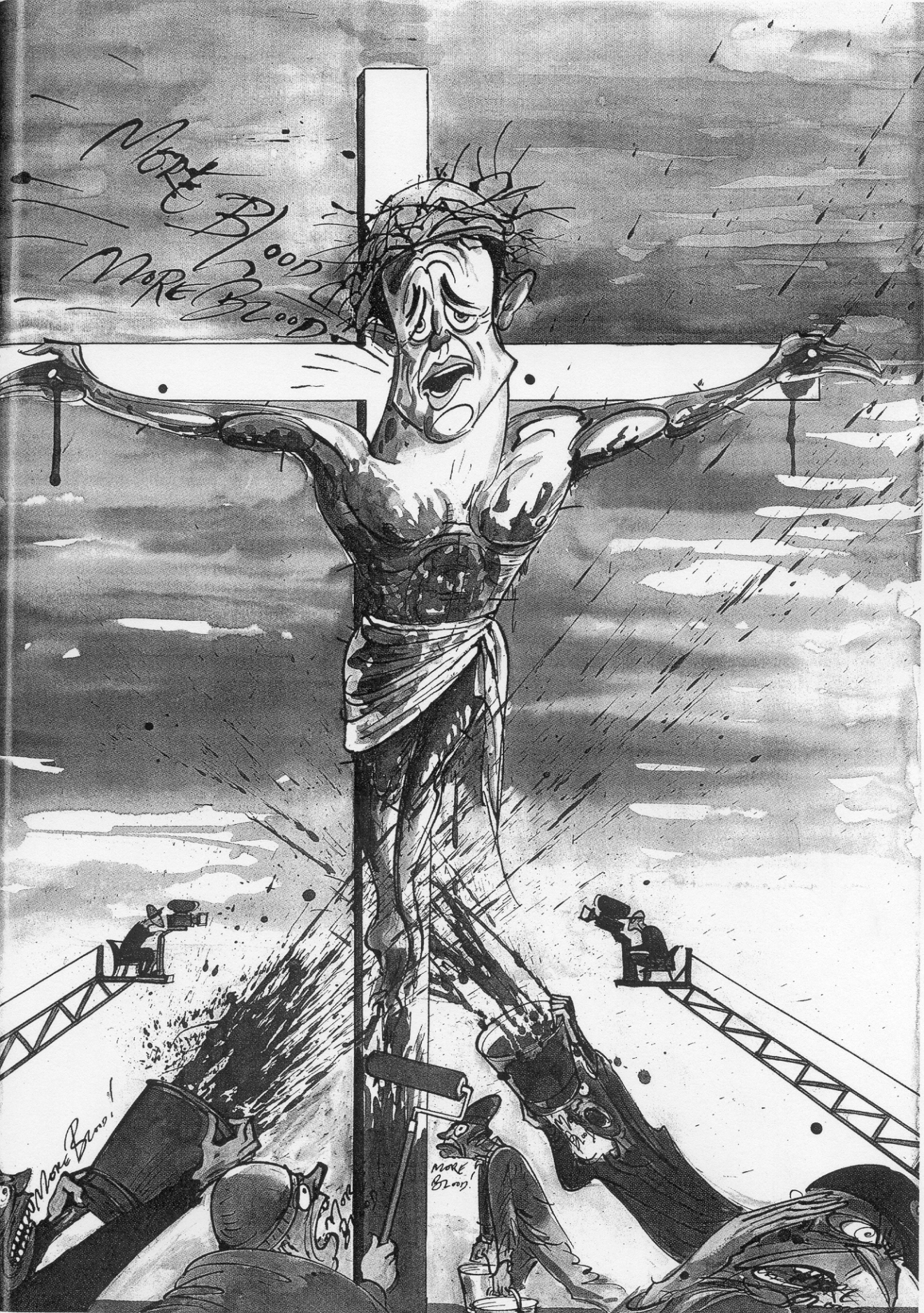
And against whom will the audience

direct its hate? As Gibson was completing the film, some historians, theologians, and clergymen accused him of emphasizing the discredited charge that it was the ancient Jews who were primarily responsible for killing Jesus, a claim that has served as the traditional justification for the persecution of the Jews in Europe for nearly two millennia. The critics turn out to have been right. Gibson is guilty of some serious mischief in his handling of these issues. But he may have also committed an aggression against Christian believers. The movie has been hailed as a religious experience by various Catholic and Protestant groups, some of whom, with an ungodly eye to the commercial realities of film distribution, have prepurchased blocks of tickets or rented theatres to insure "The Passion" a healthy opening weekend's business. But how, I wonder, will people become better Christians if they are filled with the guilt, anguish, or loathing that this movie may create in their souls?

"The Passion" opens at night in the Garden of Gethsemane—a hushed, misty grotto bathed in a purplish disco light. Softly chanting female voices float on the soundtrack, accompanied by electronic shrieks and thuds. At first, the movie looks like a graveyard horror flick, and then, as Jewish temple guards show up bearing torches, like a faintly tedious art film. The Jews speak in Aramaic, and the Romans speak in Latin; the movie is subtitled in English. Gibson distances the dialogue from us,

as if Jesus' famous words were only incidental and the visual spectacle—Gibson's work as a director—were the real point. Then the beatings begin: Jesus is punched and slapped, struck with chains, trussed, and dangled over a wall. In the middle of the night, a hasty trial gets under way before Caiaphas (Mattia Sbragia) and other Jewish priests. Caiaphas, a cynical, devious, petty dictator, interrogates Jesus, and then turns him over to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov), who tries again and again to spare Jesus from the crucifixion that the priests demand. From the movie, we get the impression that the priests are either merely envious of Jesus' spiritual power or inherently and inexplicably vicious. And Pilate is not the bloody governor of history (even Tiberius paused at his crimes against the Jews) but a civilized and humane leader tormented by the burdens of power—he holds a soulful discussion with his wife on the nature of truth.

Gibson and his screenwriter, Benedict Fitzgerald, selected and enhanced incidents from the four Gospels and collated them into a single, surpassingly violent narrative—the scourging, for instance, which is mentioned only in a few phrases in Matthew, Mark, and John, is drawn out to the point of excruciation and beyond. History is also treated selectively. The writer Jon Meacham, in a patient and thorough article in *Newsweek*, has detailed the many small ways that Gibson disregarded what historians know of the period, with the effect of assigning greater responsibility to the Jews, and less to the Romans, for Jesus' death. Meacham's central thesis, which is shared by others, is that the priests may have been willing to sacrifice Jesus—whose mass following may have posed a threat to Roman governance—in order to deter Pilate from crushing the Jewish community altogether. It's also possible that the temple elite may have wanted to get rid of the leader of a new sect, but only Pilate had the authority to order a crucifixion—a very public event that was designed to be a warning to potential rebels. Gibson ignores most of the dismaying political context, as well as the likelihood that the Gospel writers, still under



Roman rule, had very practical reasons to downplay the Romans' role in the Crucifixion. It's true that when the Roman soldiers, their faces twisted in glee, go to work on Jesus, they seem even more depraved than the Jews. But, as Gibson knows, history rescued the pagans from eternal blame—eventually, they came to their senses and saw the light. The Emperor Constantine converted in the early fourth century, and Christianized the empire, and the medieval period saw the rise of the Roman Catholic Church. So the Romans' descendants triumphed, while the Jews were cast into darkness and, one might conclude from this movie, deserved what they got. "The Passion," in its confused way, confirms the old justifications for persecuting the Jews, and one somehow doubts that Gibson will make a sequel in which he reminds the audience that in later centuries the Church itself used torture and execution to punish not only Jews but heretics, non-believers, and dissidents.

I realize that the mere mention of historical research could exacerbate the awkward breach between medieval and modern minds, between literalist belief and the weighing of empirical evidence. "John was an eyewitness," Gibson has said. "Matthew was there." Well, they may have been there, but for decades it's been a commonplace of Biblical scholarship that the Gospels were written forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus, and not by the disciples but by nameless Christians using both written and oral sources. Gibson can brush aside the work of scholars and historians because he has a powerful weapon at hand—the cinema—with which he can create something greater than argument; he can create faith. As a movie-maker, Gibson is not without skill. The sets, which were built in Italy, where the movie was filmed, are far from perfect, but they convey the beauty of Jerusalem's courtyards and archways. Gibson, working with the cinematographer Caleb Deschanel, gives us the ravaged stone face of Calvary, the gray light at the time of the Crucifixion, the leaden pace of the movie's spectacular agonies. Felliniesque tormenters gambol and jeer on the sidelines, and, at times, the whirl of figures around Jesus, both hostile and

friendly, seems held in place by a kind of magnetic force. The hounding and suicide of the betrayer Judas is accomplished in a few brusque strokes. Here and there, the movie has a dismal, heavy-souled power.

By contrast with the dispatching of Judas, the lashing and flaying of Jesus goes on forever, prolonged by Gibson's punishing use of slow motion, sometimes with Jesus' face in the foreground, so that we can see him writhe and howl. In the climb up to Calvary, Caviezel, one eye swollen shut, his mouth open in agony, collapses repeatedly in slow motion under the weight of the Cross. Then comes the Crucifixion itself, dramatized with a curious fixation on the technical details—an arm pulled out of its socket, huge nails hammered into hands, with Caviezel jumping after each whack. At that point, I said to myself, "Mel Gibson has lost it," and I was reminded of what other writers have pointed out—that Gibson, as an actor, has been beaten, mashed, and disembowelled in many of his movies. His obsession with pain, disguised by religious feelings, has now reached a frightening apotheosis.

Mel Gibson is an extremely conservative Catholic who rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican council. He's against complacent, feel-good Christianity, and, judging from his movie, he must despise the grandiose old Hollywood kitsch of "The Robe," "The King of Kings," "The Greatest Story Ever Told," and "Ben-Hur," with their Hallmark twinkling skies, their big stars treading across sacred California sands, and their lamblike Jesus, whose simple presence overwhelms Charlton Heston. But saying that Gibson is sincere doesn't mean he isn't foolish, or worse. He can rightly claim that there's a strain of morbidity running through Christian iconography—one thinks of the reliquaries in Roman churches and the bloody and ravaged Christ in Northern Renaissance and German art, culminating in such works as Matthias Grünewald's 1515 "Isenheim Altarpiece," with its thorned Christ in full torment on the Cross. But the central tradition of Italian Renaissance painting left Christ relatively unscathed; the artists emphasized not the physi-

cal 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. Gibson instructed Deschanel to make the movie look like the paintings of Caravaggio, but in Caravaggio's own "Flagellation of Christ" the body of Jesus is only slightly marked. Even Goya, who hardly shrank from dismemberment and pain in his work, created a "Crucifixion" with a nearly unblemished Jesus. Crucifixion, as the Romans used it, was meant to make a spectacle out of degradation and suffering—to humiliate the victim through the apparatus of torture. By embracing the Roman pageant so openly, using all the emotional resources of cinema, Gibson has cancelled out the redemptive and transfiguring power of art. And by casting James Caviezel, an actor without charisma here, and then feasting on his physical destruction, he has turned Jesus back into a mere body. The depictions in "The Passion," one of the cruellest movies in the history of the cinema, are akin to the bloody Pop representation of Jesus found in, say, a roadside shrine in Mexico, where the addition of an Aztec sacrificial flourish makes the passion a little more passionate. Such are the traps of literal-mindedness. The great modernist artists, aware of the danger of kitsch and the fascination of sadomasochism, have largely withdrawn into austerity and awed abstraction or into fervent humanism, as in Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ" (1988), which features an existential Jesus sorely tried by the difficulty of the task before him. There are many ways of putting Jesus at risk and making us feel his suffering.

What is most depressing about "The Passion" is the thought that people will take their children to see it. Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," not "Let the little children watch me suffer." How will parents deal with the pain, terror, and anger that children will doubtless feel as they watch a man flayed and pierced until dead? The despair of the movie is hard to shrug off, and Gibson's timing couldn't be more unfortunate: another dose of death-haunted religious fanaticism is the last thing we need. ♦