

The Passion of the Christ Panel notes

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Let me start by saying that I believe that any meaning made with a film happens in the “in- between” – that is, not dictated by the filmmaker, nor solely by the viewer, but in an intimate and complex dance between the two. I engage this film very much from my own experience – as a Catholic, as mother, as someone who lives a middle class existence in the US, as a teacher at a seminary, and so on.

Five minutes is not much time, so I’ll simply propose three provocations, or things to ponder:

These three are tied to my usual frame for thinking about media – authenticity, authority, agency.

In terms of authenticity – how authentic does the film feel to me? I hope the other scholars gathered here will speak to the critical historical elements of its interpretation, I’ll simply stick to the film’s grammar and here I’ll note that it felt very real. As I traced that feeling, I began to tie it into popular cultural resonance. That is – ways in which the film felt very real because it was constructed in terms that were very familiar to me. It is not the biblical text I’m speaking of here (although clearly that is one element of the familiarity) but rather the ways in which the film draws on the database of popular culture. If I had the time, I would do a “compare and contrast” with the *Lord of the Rings*, but here let me simply note that much of the musical score for this film is derivative of the Howard Shore score for the *Lord of the Rings*. The film also uses a number of other

elements very familiar from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy – a dark blue/grey color palette, gritty costuming, and so on.

In terms of authority – what kind of authority is being constructed here? Clearly, in film terms, to set a film in a specific geographic site, design costuming and makeup that attempts to recreate a certain time period, use languages that are ostensibly from the era, and so on, the film is attempting to make claims of historical authority – this is, as was so widely quoted, an attempt to portray the biblical narrative “as it was.” Again, I’ll leave it to the other scholars here to note the many ways in which that accuracy is clearly flawed, but accept that the attempt was made. Besides the historical, what other kinds of authority are invoked? Primarily, it seems to me, the authority of personal experience. That is, there is very little in this film that makes positive claims for the authority of institutionalized religious community. Indeed, the “bad guys” in this film are the religious authorities. We are not invited into any kind of sympathetic identification with these authorities. Indeed, were it not for decades of religious education, I suspect I would be tempted to condemn these authorities, rather than seeing myself in them.

Most of the filming is done from the perspective of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and so on. We are invited to identify with the powerless – even on occasion, to see from Jesus’ perspective – but rarely if ever does the camera angle invite us sympathetically into the point of view of the religious institutions of the time. Indeed, we are in some ways invited even to sympathize with Pilate, but not with the religious authorities.

The film’s interpretation spills out, of course, beyond the actual viewing of it into the pop culture phenomenon it has become – and here the filmmaker’s, that is Mel Gibson’s interviews do not invite much respect for institutional Catholic authorities, many of whom – particularly some of our most important scholars -- have been openly critical of his interpretive choices.

So the power of the film rests almost entirely on the experience Gibson attempts to construct with and for each viewer, and we are invited into meaning-making with it that eschews our institutional authorities. This is highly problematic for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that US popular culture in general tends to overemphasize personal, individual authority far more than communal, social authority.

In my own community of faith, the Roman Catholic community, we've had to confront our sinfulness in relationship with the Jewish community. It is clear that historically, passion plays have led to very real violence against the Jewish community, and it is clear that some of our biblical interpretations have been very hurtful and destructive. It is appropriate to ask – as the guidelines that our bishops and the Vatican have promulgated suggest – that any representation of the passion texts respect the complexity of the Jewish communities of the time, and portray Jesus and his followers as intimately part of those communities.

Yet this is teaching that has evolved over time, and it is teaching whose authority rests in a community, a tradition, not in individual, personal terms. I may not be able to understand, let alone *feel*, how incredibly painful this film is to people outside of my own context, but nevertheless the Church calls me to recognize that pain, to encounter it, and to bear my own culpability for it. Indeed, in some ways this film is a gift, if in watching it I come to a deeper, felt sense of my own sinfulness, of my own responsibility for the violence that is done in my name – whether as a Christian against Jews, as an American against Iraq, as a middle class person implicated in structures of racism and poverty.

But that thought leads me to my final provocation: **agency** – what kinds of agency does this film invoke and inspire us to? Again, I find it problematic because while it inspires me to enormous pain at the suffering that unfolds visually before me, it does not give me much in terms of ways to respond. I am invited into powerless witness. I am not even invited much into my own culpability for that suffering. Although the Church teaches, and our Holy Week liturgies remind us – that is I who called “crucify him” – that *we* are the people responsible for this horrible death that Jesus freely accepts – nonetheless, the

catharsis of the film does not really lead me to want to go out and place myself at personal risk to ease someone else's pain – and yet, that is at the heart of much of the gospel message.

So... pondering authenticity, authority, agency. I was moved by this film, and moved specifically to ask these questions.