

“Why Aren’t We Seeing This Now?” Public(ized) Torture in The Passion of the Christ and Fahrenheit 9/11

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This year, Mel Gibson and Michael Moore have both made films that have had writers and commentators scrambling to discuss and understand the polarization of America, to look for the differences between Right wing Christians and the Left wing. Both Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ and Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 have taken in hundreds of millions of dollars, despite being maligned in production as niche films at best. And, both films have inspired a vitreous flow of hateful criticism, furthering the belief that they are cultural representations of a bitterly divided nation.

However, as divisive as these films may appear to be, their similar content reveals something about American culture and mythology. To explore this, I will analyze the use of public (publicized) torture in both films, the roles of Jesus and soldiers, how the depiction of torture affects viewers, and what this might say about the American psyche.

According to Michel Foucault, the age of public torture in the Western world largely came to end by the mid 19th century. Previously, public torture was used by those in power to discourage crime through the horrifying spectacle that it created. It was meant to

[...] mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy; even if its function is to ‘purge’ the crime, torture does not reconcile; it traces around or, rather, on the very body of the condemned man signs that must not be effaced; in any case, men will remember public

exhibition, the pillory, torture and pain duly observed. *And, from the point of view from the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph.* (34, my emphasis)

However, this method was reformed and discarded during the Enlightenment, in favor of the modern system: public trials and sentencing, private punishment and execution. While this shift is assumed to be more humane, its origin stems more from the state's desire to maintain power than from any humanitarian concerns. Foucault contends that those in power eventually realized that the public, rather than being reminded of state power and discouraged from crime, would instead *sympathize* with the condemned and perceive the executioner and the state as linked to the criminal act:

...punishment was thought to equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them, to show them the ferocity of crime, *to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murderers, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration.* (9 my emphasis.)

Clearly, governments prefer to suppress dissidents and criminals, not make martyrs of them. Thus, the age of the state publicly and violently challenging the criminal came to a quiet close.

However, The Passion and Fahrenheit represent a return to torture as public spectacle. While the town square has been replaced by the movie theatre, the popularity

of these films demonstrates that the public's voracious appetite for torture hasn't diminished. And both directors, like the state powers that came before them, use the spectacle of blood and violence to influence the behaviors of their audience.

Obviously, The Passion most explicitly portrays torture. In the film, Jesus, who had been kicked, punched, slapped, spit upon, and dragged in chains, is presented to the Roman Consulate, Pontias Pilate. Gibson's portrayal of Pilate has been lauded for its sympathy, and his encounter with Jesus is an indeed human moment. "*Quid est veritas?*" he asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Pilate, unsure of how to handle the Sanhedrin's request for the death of this dissident preacher, searches for a tangible solution to the political problem he is faced with. However, seemingly evasively, Jesus merely replies, "I am truth."

If Pilate, or anyone in the audience for that matter, is hoping for a clearer presentation of Jesus' unique philosophy, he is disappointed: Gibson presents his audience very little of Jesus' teachings. Rather, *veritas*, the truth, is presented to the public through torture: "In the practice of torture, pain, confrontation and truth were bound together: they worked together on the patient's body. The search for truth was certainly a way of obtaining evidence... but it was also the battle, and this victory of one adversary over the other, that 'produced' truth according to a ritual" (Foucault 41). Indeed, The Passion deals almost exclusively with the ritualistic death of who is, given the lack of context, a political criminal. This is particularly true of the flaying scene, where the soldiers slowly, methodically, and publicly choose their weapons and brutally rip the flesh from Jesus' prone body.

The “truth” that is produced through the ritual of torture must be made public in order to be effective. According to Foucault, this presentation is the responsibility of the condemned, Jesus. “It was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all” (43). Thus, since there is little in the way of Christian philosophy, Gibson’s Jesus does no more than preach a doctrine of state power and humiliating punishment.

Gibson deems this as necessary. In interviews, he repeatedly emphasizes the need for violence to portray the Christ story. "I wanted it to be shocking," Gibson said in an interview with Diane Sawyer. "And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge ... so that they see the enormity — the enormity of that sacrifice — to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule” (“[Pain and Passion](#)”). Implied in this statement is Gibson’s Catholic belief that Christians are missing something in their conception of Jesus Christ: the gory violence of the Crucifixion. His use of Sister Anne Emmerich’s *The Dolorious Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* as source material for the film belies his belief that Christian churches should return to presenting the Jesus story as a violent sacrifice in exchange for the sins of humanity. As he bluntly puts it in an interview with Peggy Noonan, “I wanted to overwhelm people with it” (94).

There is nothing wrong with “pushing the viewer over the edge,” but when the viewer is compelled to be in the audience, when the viewer is offered a black-and-white choice in terms of accepting or rejecting the content of the film, the idea of

“overwhelming” takes on a whole new meaning. The millions of dollars’ worth of people who have seen the film have done so in large part because of the tacit promise that Gibson and the various churches have made to the public in interviews: simply put, you must see this film, because to see this film and not like it is to not believe in the Gospels. To not believe in the Gospels is to be bound for hell.

The power of the cinema is its ability to fulfill promises such as this. Films have the power to bring fantasy to a place that is larger than life, perhaps more real than life. Understandably, many Christian viewers have lauded the film for its accuracy. As the Pope was legendarily reported as saying, “It is as it was”; i.e., the film is accurate. It is as if faith so demands a visual representation of Christ that the film is no longer a film; it is *real*.

The result of this is that the film is a tool of social control. The viewer, who must accept the film, only does so out of self-interest and a desire to avoid pain and suffering in the afterlife. Evangelical churches clearly understand this; through evangelical efforts to present the film to the “unchurched,” church pews have swelled since *The Passion* debuted ([Warren](#)). Furthermore, the conservative community has also been intricately linked to the film: the guest list for early screenings included “Peggy Noonan, Cal Thomas and Kate O’Beirne; conservative essayist Michael Novak; President Bush’s abortive nominee for labor secretary, Linda Chavez; staff director Mark Rodgers of the Senate Republican conference chaired by Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa.; former Republican House member Mark Siljander of Michigan; and White House staffer David Kuo, deputy director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives” ([Grove](#)). Clearly, any

popular culture vehicle that creates sympathy for Christ and an interest in Christianity is embraced by the conservative community.

Michael Moore's politics are anything but conservative, but torture is an element of Fahrenheit as well. However, Moore's use of it is far more complex than Gibson's. While Gibson depends on the viewer to bring her knowledge of Christian theology to the theater to understand The Passion, Moore relies heavily on the American mythology of the soldier. In American culture, the soldier is a Jesus-figure; the most common quality he embodies is sacrifice. The U.S. Army does not write the word Soldier without capitalizing it, just as any church always capitalizes Jesus. It is taboo, politically or socially, to mock soldiers or the Army. They are depicted as "heroes" and "leaders" who have faith in their country and the President, warriors for all that is right. It is common knowledge that, in the war on terror, President Bush has repeatedly used the language of good and evil to describe the conflict. This language includes the Soldier; in a typical speech, given 3 April 2003 at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Bush tells a gathering of troops

[The deaths of soldiers] are sacrifices in a high calling -- the defense of our nation and the peace of the world. Overcoming evil is the noblest cause and the hardest work. And the liberation of millions is the fulfillment of America's founding promise. The objectives we've set in this war are worthy of America, worthy of all the acts of heroism and generosity that have come before. Once again, we are applying the power of our country to ensure our security and to serve the cause of justice. And we will prevail. (Votesmart).

Thus, the Soldier is called on to sacrifice his or her life, not only for the rest of the country but the people of the world. Those people and countries that they help are often depicted as feminized, oppressed, powerless nations; the “meek” that any good Christian or Soldier must help. Those who remain behind in the States are, in a way, sinners: consider the criticism of Bill Clinton as a draft dodger or of George Bush as a deserter. Like Jesus, the Soldier sheds her blood to buy the freedom of millions of sinner-citizens.

Just like Bush, or anyone else working in public life or the culture industry in the U.S., Moore’s sympathy has to lie with the martyred soldiers. However, he uses different language than the President. His comparison of the razed neighborhoods of Flint to the bombed-out streets of Baghdad presents the war in terms of race and class, and makes the decision to join the army sound like a compulsory economic move rather than voluntary. Still, in Moore’s language the Soldier is a Jesus figure: a poor and humble person who has faith in his country, hears the undeniable call of the recruiter and cannot refuse his destiny.

This is clearest in Moore’s depiction of Lila Lipscomb’s son Michael Pederson. Pederson is portrayed in Fahrenheit as an innocent sacrifice, full of faith in his father-president. According to his mother, he was “raised to...respect the respect the position of the president of the United States” ([Schmitt](#)). However, he was, like Jesus, conflicted between his duty and his human fear. Michael’s letters home, particularly the one Lila read in the film, contain doubts about the President reminiscent of Jesus’ moments of doubt in his Father in Gestheme: “He got us out here for nothing whatsoever. I am so furious right now, Mama.” His death, therefore, is as emotional as Jesus’ and raises the

same questions: Why did he have to die? What kind of (father, president) would sacrifice his son?

Moore uses this mythology of “Soldiers as Jesus,” then, like Gibson, presents the viewer with disturbing images of bloody, maimed soldiers, tortured by wounds. Moore portrays them in the act of dying for their country’s sins. His justification for this footage sounds strikingly similar to Gibson’s tacit assertion about the image of Jesus: Americans are not being presented with the uncensored, violent reality of the Iraq War. “Why aren't we seeing [violent footage of the Iraq War] now? Because if you show this to the American public every night while they're eating dinner they might turn against the war. And so the MPAA gives me an R rating. Images that we used to see on television at 6:30 are now considered an R rating?” (“[Passion of Michael Moore](#)”).

However, Moore’s message would not resonate nearly as much with anti-war viewers if he had merely presented wounded American soldiers. With the most controversial footage of the film, Moore builds sympathy for Iraqis as well. The scenes of American soldiers sexually abusing and torturing Iraqi prisoners adds an element of complexity to Fahrenheit.

This is a public display of disciplinary torture, the first genuine footage of these happenings. While the story of Abu Ghraib appeared in the news several months before Fahrenheit was released, the film footage and pictures involved were not gathered by reporters for public dissemination; rather, they were created by the military for blackmail and psychological torture means. As Seymour Hersh writes, “The government consultant said that there may have been a serious goal, in the beginning, behind the sexual humiliation and the posed photographs. It was thought that some prisoners would do

anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends” ([Hersh](#)). Thus, although the Abu Ghraib abuses were visually documented, the documentation was meant to remain private – only exposed to the public in the event that the U.S. military wanted to shame an Iraqi.

Moore’s film is the first attempt to create and present a public spectacle of the Iraqi prisoner torture. Like any public spectacle of torture, the public’s sympathy lies with the tortured, not the torturer, and, since torture has the effect of making the “judges [appear to be] murderers,” Moore’s implicit claim is that the judges – Bush, Rumsfeld, et al – are the guilty parties, not “the poor kids at the end of the food chain” (qtd in [Hersh](#)).

In the end, a viewer leaving these theaters are to ask himself: who is responsible for the terrible things I have witnessed? Both directors lay the final blame for the spilling of blood and torture at the feet of the audience itself. Gibson states the Catholic philosophy of universal guilt: whenever asked in interviews about who killed Jesus, he typically replies, “The big answer is, we all did. I’ll be the first in the culpability stakes here” (“[Pain and Passion](#)”). Moore uses very similar language to explain who is responsible for the Iraq War:

We killed a lot of civilians, and I think that we're going to have to answer for that – whether it's now or in the hereafter. If you pay taxes and you're an American your name is on those bombs. They were human beings who were just trying to get on with their daily lives. (“[Passion of Michael Moore](#)”)

Thus, the language of both directors belies a uniquely American sense of guilt and loss. Given the immense popularity of these films, this sense of guilt and complicity is

made resonantly public. It reveals in a small manner the way Americans look at themselves in relation to the world: as torturers, as corrupt judges, as murderers, in any case, not as noble as those we admire.

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