Mel Gibson’s passion and

The Passion of the Christ

In view of the extraordinary lead-up to The Passion of the Christ, it has been harder than usual to approach this film cold.

For weeks there seemed to be scarcely a day when the papers weren’t fuelling the publicity surrounding the film by drawing attention either to the inflammatory outbursts of various interest groups or to the secrecy relating to its pre-release screenings. We usually acquire some sort of baggage from the hype attached to major films: it is in the producers’ interests to try to ensure this; but what went on before The Passion actually hit the screens was something else again.

It isn’t just a matter of anticipation. Plenty of films rouse this: think back to the minatory if ungrammatical 1963 ad that warned filmgoers that ‘The Birds is coming’ or to the pram sinisterly silhouetted in the publicity for Rosemary’s Baby (1968), or more recently the whipping up of aficionado madness for Star Wars: The Phantom Menace (1999) or
It will be interesting to see what sort of longer term to decide exactly what kinds of audience it is expected the film has to stand on its own two feet, to extend the long way here from the cosy pieties of Father Bing Crosby or Sister Ingrid Bergman in Leo McCarey’s Going My Way (1944) or The Bells of St Mary’s (1945), or from the awesome vulgarities of Cecil B. deMille’s The Ten Commandments (1956), or from such CinemaScopic spectacles as Quo Vadis? (1951, Mervyn LeRoy), The Robe (1954, Henry Koster) and Ben Hur (1959). The last-named works its way up to the Crucifixion but it is interesting to note that the figure of Christ is scarcely visible in its incarnation by little-known actor Claude Heater, and in The Robe Christ doesn’t appear but His voice was heard (actor Cameron Mitchell’s). There had always been a wariness about the clear physical imaging of Christ on the screen, but in the 1960s there were two large-scale versions of Christ’s passion. First was Nicholas Ray’s King of Kings (1961), much derided at the time, with Jeffrey Hunter as a Christ with shaven armpits and giving rise to the unfairness of the tag I Was a Teenage Jesus; in later decades, auteurists have been kinder to this film, Ray having become one of their heroes. So far, no one has sought to reclaim George Stevens’s lumbering The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), which astutely cast Max Von Sydow—the Swedish actor then unknown outside the art house screenings of his films for Ingmar Bergman—as Christ, thereby launching his prolific international career. More arresting than either of these were Italian Marxist Pier Paolo Pasolini’s The Gospel According to St Matthew (1964), in which the life of Christ (Enrique Irazoqui) is presented in near-documentary style, and Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) in which Christ (Willem Dafoe) is tempted with visions of a normal life.

The latter film roused some controversy, though nothing to compare with the barrage that has ushered Mel Gibson’s film into the cinemas. The Pasolini and the Scorsese had clear angles of purchase on their material; they were not interested in offering sanitised approaches to the Gospels’ story of betrayal and suffering. Nor, I think, is Gibson. The mild scratchless body of the crucified Christ which one sees in so much art, on the page or canvas or in stained glass, is not the kind of presence any of these three wants to dramatise.

Gibson himself is a key element in our preliminary knowledge about The Passion and his film persona, honed over several decades, seems to me to hover over the

Think of some of the earlier representations of religion in the cinema. We’re a long way here from the cosy pieties of Father Bing Crosby or Sister Ingrid Bergman in Leo McCarey’s Going My Way (1944) or The Bells of St Mary’s (1945), or from the awesome vulgarities of Cecil B. deMille’s The Ten Commandments (1956), or from such CinemaScopic spectacles as Quo Vadis? (1951, Mervyn LeRoy), The Robe (1954, Henry Koster) and Ben Hur (1959). The last-named works its way up to the Crucifixion but it is interesting to note that the figure of Christ is scarcely visible in its incarnation by little-known actor Claude Heater, and in The Robe Christ doesn’t appear but His voice was heard (actor Cameron Mitchell’s). There had always been a wariness about the clear physical imaging of Christ on the screen, but in the 1960s there were two large-scale versions of Christ’s passion. First was Nicholas Ray’s King of Kings (1961), much derided at the time, with Jeffrey Hunter as a Christ with shaven armpits and giving rise to the unfairness of the tag I Was a Teenage Jesus; in later decades, auteurists have been kinder to this film, Ray having become one of their heroes. So far, no one has sought to reclaim George Stevens’s lumbering The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), which astutely cast Max Von Sydow—the Swedish actor then unknown outside the art house screenings of his films for Ingmar Bergman—as Christ, thereby launching his prolific international career. More arresting than either of these were Italian Marxist Pier Paolo Pasolini’s The Gospel According to St Matthew (1964), in which the life of Christ (Enrique Irazoqui) is presented in near-documentary style, and Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) in which Christ (Willem Dafoe) is tempted with visions of a normal life.

The latter film roused some controversy, though nothing to compare with the barrage that has ushered Mel Gibson’s film into the cinemas. The Pasolini and the Scorsese had clear angles of purchase on their material; they were not interested in offering sanitised approaches to the Gospels’ story of betrayal and suffering. Nor, I think, is Gibson. The mild scratchless body of the crucified Christ which one sees in so much art, on the page or canvas or in stained glass, is not the kind of presence any of these three wants to dramatise.

Gibson himself is a key element in our preliminary knowledge about The Passion and his film persona, honed over several decades, seems to me to hover over the
commercial legs 'The Passion' will prove to have. I'd suggest that it is quite difficult to attract when the white heat of the controversial preliminaries begins to cool and anatomical metaphor.
image of Christ his film presents. Surely he would have played Christ himself if he were not now, at forty-eight, too old. (Among the others, Hunter, thirty-four, Von Sydow, thirty-six and Dafoe, thirty-three, at the time of their films’ release, were much nearer the historical age of the crucified Christ.) In the kinds of hero figure Gibson has played there has very often been an element of the martyr; he has never been the uncomplicated protagonist who settles things with fists or guns without a powerful sense of inner warring. One needs only to recall Frank in Gallipoli (1981), Guy in The Year of Living Dangerously (1982), Martin Riggs, the haunted Viet vet detective, still mourning his wife, in Lethal Weapon (1987), (directing himself as) William Wallace, Scottish folk hero in Braveheart (1995), let alone Hamlet (1991) and the most obvious case of all: the ‘Mad Max’ figure, bereft of wife and child in the first of the series (1979). He may now be too old to play the role that might have been for him the apotheosis of this strain of wounded protagonist, but he is certainly a powerful enough media figure to get the film made, to get it made as he wants it, and to ensure that the result is a major media event.

However, Gibson is not only a potent name and possessor of high charisma as star and director, but he is also a devout Christian, committed to a certain kind of traditional Catholicism which, as every newspaper reader must now know, has led him to build a US$4.5 million church for worshippers of like mind, known as sedevacantists. This breakaway conservative group, of which Gibson’s father, Hutton Gibson, is the driving force, is at odds with the Catholic thinking that embraced Vatican II. The latter proclamations did away with the Latin mass and with the idea of Jewish guilt for Christ’s death. To stand against the tide of such liberalizing thought was to invite charges of anti-Semitism, which Gibson has denied though he has not repudiated his father’s denial of the Holocaust. How far does the controversy surrounding the film a liberalizing thought was to invite charges of blasphemy among the gathering crowd; and Peter’s denial of Christ is picked out briefly, though it cannot be said that the disciples are seriously differentiated.

Much of the talk about The Passion has focused on its violence and it is impossible to skirt the issue in any discussion of the film. Violence is now so prevalent in contemporary cinema that it becomes more than ever important to ask what function it is serving. In general I have a low tolerance for the more explicit images of violence, whether it is the prolonged rape sequence of Irreversible or for the mindless mayhem of, say, Once Upon a Time in Mexico, both screening in Melbourne as I write. The former film, alarming as it is, can argue serious purpose; it is clear that the viewer is meant to react with horror to the attack; and the long take in which it is enacted forces one to respond to its violation. In the latter, the fantastically repetitive and contrived ways in which myriad damages are inflicted on cast members seem merely silly and tedious, and perhaps therefore more reprehensible. (Serendipity: while writing this piece, I was reading Shirley Hazzard’s Greene on Capri, in which she recalls Graham Greene as saying, ‘I’m not against violence. What I can’t stand is brutality posing as fun’. Violence ‘posing as fun’ neatly sums up my objection to a lot of what passes for modern action cinema. )

In The Passion the unremitting violence of scourgings and the like is undoubtedly wearing on the spectator, and also risks tedium, but at least one can see that it is part of a considered realist agenda: an agenda that wants us to acknowledge the sheer physical torment to which Christ must, in any realist assessment of His passion, have been subjected, along with the spiritual agony to which the film first makes us privy. I think the point would have been more trenchantly made with a less insistent attention to rendering every lash. Some will find an element of sadism in the way the camera compels attention

who may or may not have said, ‘It is as it was’—since denied) had not been invited to comment on it, before and/or after it had been screened?

And what is the film itself like? Is it possible to adopt the usual stance of critical objectivity before the fact and consider The Passion of the Christ purely as an aesthetic artefact; that is, how far do both the hype and the subject itself preclude such a stance? It would be much easier if the film were either an unequivocal masterpiece or a risible dog. It is neither. It is much easier to be memorable than to be justiﬁcable, to be relentlessly ‘witty’ like some of the writing about it, than to assess what Gibson seems to be attempting and how far he succeeds. It is a far from negligible achievement though I have to admit it is not one to which I wish to subject myself again.

Gibson uses the Gospels, especially ‘St John’, as his source, along with The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by the eighteenth-century nun, Anne Emmerich, whose vision Gibson claims ‘completely meshes with the four gospels’, a fact disputed by many commentators. And part of the basis of criticism of the film is that it doesn’t adhere to the gospels for its whole narrative length, and that it has to imagine in detail what the Gospels do not spell out in the way of Christ’s tribulations. Gibson goes on to insist that ‘we’re telling the fact’ as if he is treating the last twelve hours of Christ’s life as having biographical authenticity. This is important to grasping in any appraisal of the film, especially in regard to the harrowingly unrelenting physical violence that may be the most powerful response many will bring away from it.

The film opens in the Garden of Gethsemane, and this sequence, bathed in a blue night light, has considerable visual and affective power as, first, Christ prays while His disciples sleep (‘Could you not wake one hour with me?’ He asks them). This episode is intercut with Judas’s receiving the bag of money thrown contemptuously at him, then leading the soldiers to the garden. Christ’s fears and agony of mind are apparent in James Caviezel’s performance at this stage and there is real drama in the approach of the flares and the soldiers, in the filming of the sequence that leads to Christ’s confrontation with Judas, and to the repairing of the Roman soldier’s severed ear. The prevailing hue shifts to brown as the scene moves to a courtyard with talk of trouble brewing; there are claims of blasphemy among the gathering crowd;
to the details of floggings, to the lashing with chains, to the driving in of the nails, to the upturning of the cross so that Christ’s body is dragged along the stony path, to the vicious laughter of the perpetrators, and I can sympathize with such a response even though I do not feel it is any part of Gibson’s overt intention.

The intention seems genuinely to be to make the physical texture of the passion as excruciating as the spiritual, but in the balance it must be said that the former dominates. The film doesn’t adequately address the issue of why Christ must die, why a loving God should require this of His son. Gibson makes, in my view, an aesthetic miscalculation in this matter: it is one thing to want to make the audience aware of the intolerable punishments inflicted on Christ; it is another to create some kind of dramatic rhythm that will ensure, by contrasts, that the gruelling physicalities are seen in a broader context.

There are signs that Gibson has been aware of this need. First, there are several intimate moments interspersed with the more pervasive sequences of crowds either appalled or appalling. For instance, those between Pilate and his wife Claudia bring in a quieter more personal interest, an interest in character that is not generally one of the film’s preoccupations. These moments are rare and certainly, the scenes involving the two Marys and John make little contribution to such emotional nuancing. Second, Christ’s memories in ‘flashbacks’ (the term is not strictly accurate) offer some respite from the violence. There is an unexpected touch of humour in the carpenter’s workroom when Mary wonders if there is any future for the carpenter’s workroom. Gibson makes, in my view, an aesthetic miscalculation in this matter: it is one thing to want to make the audience aware of the intolerable punishments inflicted on Christ; it is another to create some kind of dramatic rhythm that will ensure, by contrasts, that the gruelling physicalities are seen in a broader context.

P.S. Having deliberately refrained from reading reviews until after writing the above, I’d like to commend readers to Philippa Hawker and Jim Schembri’s even-handed accounts of the film in The Age, 26/2 and 27/2 respectively. It was good to read something considered after the generation of so much proleptic heat had produced so little light.

Endnotes
