

The movie starts with stringent emotional and spiritual conflict. We see Jesus kneeling in Garden of Gethemene, bathed in moonlight, sweating and struggling with himself and the woman representing Satan. His disciples betray him, most by their absence, Judas by his presence. Roman soldiers take Jesus, pushing, prodding, and even beating him as they lead him to the Jewish courts. There, Jewish officials degrade him, ignoring the several in the court that would support Jesus, mocking him and allowing the crowds to insult and abuse him. They turn Jesus over to the Roman courts, and then the real physical cruelty begins. Pilate brings Jesus before the crowd, who begs for his crucifixion. Pilate orders that Jesus be beaten, and a fifteen-minute scene that seems like an eternity ensues. We watch soldiers beat Jesus with canes, then whips, and finally with a cat-of-nine-tails. We watch his back be totally stripped of flesh, we watch his ribs be exposed, and when we think we're finally going to gain reprieve, they turn Jesus over to whip him some more. Soldiers then force a crown made of thorns on his head, dress him in a robe, and parade him before the crowd. Eventually, Pilate orders Jesus crucified. Jesus attempts to carry his cross up to Golgotha, barely being able to walk, until a soldier orders a bystander to help. Meanwhile, the soldiers and crowd mock, spit, and even beat Jesus when given the chance. When he achieves the top of the hill, soldiers nail Jesus to the cross and roughly drop the cross in the ground. We then watch as Jesus suffers on the cross, until he finally dies.

The Passion of the Christ is a brutally violent film. Major groups of people and critics oppose the movie, claiming that the movie is too violent; The Passion of the Christ has been called a “gore-fest” and even a “pornographic celebration of suffering.” Other groups oppose the movie on basis of questionable content, arguing that the movie is anti-

Semitic, unhistorical, and de-contextualized. The movie angers, offends, saddens, and unsettles. But why is it that critics, who are daily inundated by the apparently acceptable violence of movies like Kill Bill, Se7en, and Saving Private Ryan, are bothered by this movie when mothers, who bring their 13 year-old sons and daughters and who haven't seen anything rated higher than PG, think The Passion is the greatest movie ever?

At first, I was surprised by the critics comments about the violent nature of the film. It seems no more violent than the movies already mentioned: Kill Bill, Se7en, and Saving Private Ryan. In Kill Bill, we watch The Bride kill hundreds of people, dismembering, scalping, and even plucking out eyes as she avenges her daughter's death. In Se7en, we watch a deranged man develop horrifying incarnations of the seven deadly sins, under the guise of being called by God. In Saving Private Ryan, we watch hundreds of young men die, being shot and blown to pieces, complete with a shot of one young man picking his recently dismembered arm up off the ground.

The Passion of the Christ truly seems no more violent than these, at first glance, but there are subtle, yet significant, differences. First of all, the movies mentioned consist of large amounts of violence committed by one or more people, but spread over a larger group of people. Again, The Bride kills hundred, the deranged man tortures at least seven, and thousands die in the fight for Omaha Beach. In The Passion of the Christ, all of the violence, committed by many different groups of people, focuses on one man—Jesus. The only three acts of violence that are not focused on Jesus occur when Jesus crushes the head of the snake, when Peter attacks the guard, and Judas's suicide.

Also, in the previously mentioned movies, the victims of the violence fight back. Her victims bruise and beat The Bride, even burying her alive at one point; the police

arrests the deranged man; and the soldiers eventually win the battle in Normandy. In stark contrast, Jesus never fights back, and even gives Pilate what seems like permission to crucify him: “No authority has been given you expect by the one...etc.” If you’ll notice the very early description of the movie, even, Jesus is the object of other people’s actions: “disciples betray him...soldiers take Jesus...officials degrade him...we watch....” Except for the opening scene, when Jesus strikes the snake and heals the soldier’s ear, Jesus is a largely passive presence, allowing these horrific actions to occur.

When we consider these characteristics, The Passion of the Christ loses its innocence, as James Carroll’s label of “a pornographic celebration of suffering” begins to make sense. The premise of pornography seems to revolve around the submission of one person to the aggressive, typically sexual, acts of another. However, because of the nature of submission, especially sexual submission, pornography is also typified as violent. The Passion, likewise, revolves around the violence acts of an aggressor against one submissive person. Subsequently, we understand the charges against the movie; to some extent, The Passion can be considered pornographic.

Paragraph on Freud and Transference?

This explanation, while it accounts for the critic’s fury and even the condemnation of the film by critics and some scholars, fails to account for the mother who brought her 13-year-old daughter to the movie and loved it. Having never been exposed to pornography, she remains oblivious to pornographic undertones. Her lack of awareness of the undertones, however, doesn’t explain why she embraces the film despite the dramatic amount of violence and gore involved.

To answer this question, we consider Aristotle and the nature of tragedy. In his Poetics, Aristotle explains that tragedy “through pity and terror...affects the purgation of [the] emotions” (qtd. in McLeish 6). Soandso McLeish explains this concept in his summarized translation of Aristotle’s works:

In our everyday lives, most of our words and actions are, precisely, mundane, while thoughts and feeling soar. The style of *mimesis* used in Greek tragedy applies that kind of ordinariness to amazing events and emblematic people, and the technique is one of the main contributors to the feeling of complicity so essential to the dramatic form...our hearts are broken and our minds are challenged, all in a single moment. (McLeish 19)

McLeish explains the nature of mimesis as “imitation,” or as an art form that resembles the original in many ways, but that is different enough to “snag the spectator’s mind, to draw him or her to participate in the experience” (16). The nature of tragedy, then, according to McLeish’s interpretation of Aristotle, involves the imitation of originals in such a way that the audience ebcomes involved so deeply that all their emotions peak, and they are, in Aristotle’s terms, “purged.”

The Passion of the Christ follows this formula well. The story deals with “amazing events” (i.e. the death and resurrection of Christ) and “emblematic people,” as it deals with one of the most-known characters in history. At the same time, however, the movie incorporates the ordinary and the mundane. We see his mother, Mary, who in and of herself causes the figure of Jesus to become more real and sympathetic. Beyond that, though, we see Jesus’s playfulness, as he gets in a water fight with Mary; we see his industry, as we see him working in a carpenter’s shed; we see his kindness, as we see him protect a prostitute from stoning; and we even see his weakness, as we see him fall as a child. These flashbacks, while likely not exactly true to scripture or history, cause the audience’s connection to the main character to be complete.

Because of this complete character, then, we are pushed into having “our hearts broken and our minds challenged, all in a single moment,” or, rather, at the same moment, we experience “pity and terror” (McLeish, Aristotle). With flashbacks and the humanizing presence of Mary, Jesus becomes an innocent victim of political powers, and we relate to him and pity him as we see him submit to undeserved punishment. At the same time, though, we watch in horror at the lack of justice exhibited by the courts and the depravities of man exposed as soldiers gleefully tear Jesus’s skin to pieces while they whip him. We become suspended between our emotional ties, our heart-wrenching desire to help and comfort, and our nausea, our gut-wrenching desire to avoid watching the pain and gore, even if by just closing our eyes.

Such a suspension causes what Aristotle calls a “purgation” of emotion, and this leads us to the reason why the mother may have felt that this movie was one of the greatest ever. Amelie Rorty, in her essay “The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy” explains that this purgation, or catharsis, does not mean that one is completely drained of emotion by the end, although some may experience that. Catharsis, or purgation, means cleansing, or purifying. She explains that the “classical notion” of catharsis combines several ideas:

it is a medical term, referring to a therapeutic cleansing or purgation; it is a religious term, referring to a purification achieved by the formal and ritualized, bounded expression of powerful and often dangerous emotions; it is a cognitive term, referring to an intellectual resolution or clarification that involves directing emotions to their appropriate intentional objects (Rorty 14).

Aristotle meant catharsis in the cleansing sense, as more of a healthy, harmonious balance that inspires virtue (Rorty 14). Therefore, the mother comes not to watch pornography, be shocked by the violence, or even to have a draining emotional experience. Instead, as she watches the movie, the mother seeks purification, is suspended between pity and terror, and comes to an emotional balance, where she is inspired to and desires to be a better person.

Is one of these groups wrong? Are the critics who characterize the movie as pornography correct? Or are the conservative Christians, who see the movie as a harrowing but inspiring tragedy, correct?

It is possible that both groups are correct. Consider first the nature of both the Freudian transference and the nature of the Aristotelian tragedy. In Freud's instance, the viewer associates with the aggressor in order to transfer personal feelings of frustration to the victim. If critics watching The Passion sympathize with the Roman soldiers, with Pilate, or with the condemning Jewish leaders, they would be understandably disturbed. If they are associating themselves with such violence on film, which takes the place of fantasy as they project their feelings and frustrations onto the big screen, they question the possibility that they also may be capable of committing such acts in real life.

Similarly, with Aristotelian tragedy, we identify with victims instead of the aggressors. We now feel for Mary, Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and, ultimately, Jesus. By identifying with these characters, the viewer is placed in the position to complete Aristotle's recommended experience for purgation, an experience we couldn't experience if we didn't relate to Jesus. Because of the sympathy we have for Jesus and his cohorts, we pity him, and are horrified by his pain.

The different characters the viewer may sympathize with may be one feasible explanation for the conflicting viewpoints. Another possibility may be embodied in Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Lacan in The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime. In this book, Žižek explores the nature of paradoxes like the one we encounter in The Passion.

By allowing two separate explanations to the theme and content of The Passion, Gibson opens up a world of Lacanian trouble.