The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ

Alison Griffiths

The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

by Alison Griffiths

Abstract: This essay investigates medieval cathedrals, the Cyclorama of Jerusalem *panorama painted in 1895, and Mel Gibson's 2004 film* The Passion of the Christ *as distinct but related ways of experiencing the Crucifixion, or Christ's Passion. Inscribed in each of these case studies is a notion of the "revered gaze," a way of encountering and making sense of images that are intended to be spectacular in form and content. While distinct media clearly present unique possibilities for altering the nature of the Passion narrative, I argue in this essay that there are remarkable consistencies in the aesthetics and practices of the crucifixion as a transhistorical story.*

Though separated in time, medieval Christian iconography, an 1895 panorama of the Crucifixion, and Mel Gibson's controversial 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* share a great deal beyond their obvious preoccupation with the death of Christ. They are bound by a more enduring phenomenological glue, a "revered gaze," that immerses spectators in the visual site beheld. By looking at three historical case studies of visual representations of the Passion, I hope to parse their unique signifying properties and produce a more historically sensitive account of how ideas of spectacle and immersion, largely peripheral in critical discussions of Gibson's controversial film, come to define the viewing experience. I want to move beyond prevalent discussions of Gibson's film in order to begin a more phenomenologically informed conversation about historical precedents for The Passion's textual forms and ideologies.[1] Writing about *The Passion* is by no means an unproblematic task, however, and for this reason I will eschew the protocols of scholarly writing for a moment and admit that there is much I vehemently oppose in Gibson's hagiography. It is therefore impossible to write about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* without passion; but this will not be vitriolic passion, razor sharp polemic that slices through the film's weaknesses without considering why so many viewers were left speechless and with tears running down their cheeks when they walked out of the movie theater. For those readers who also refused to see the film

Alison Griffiths is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Baruch College, the City University of New York, and a member of the Doctoral Program in Theater at the CUNY Graduate Center. The author of *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), her book *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema and the History of the Immersive View* is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

on political or ideological grounds, I hope this essay will bring a new perspective and stimulate further debate. My views on the film are neither suppressed nor the driving force here; *The Passion of the Christ* cries out for an interdisciplinary approach, and to that end I move freely between medieval, cinema, visual, and cultural studies.

My intervention also builds upon the increasing appropriation of postmodern theory within medieval studies, a response to medievalist Pamela Sheingorn's recent call for scholars to continually keep the Common Era in mind when conducting research, to excavate the "sedimentation of the Medieval" in contemporary discourse rather than simply view the Middle Ages as darkly "Other."[2] This essay is keenly aware of the "period eye" but also of its reverberations in contemporary image-making practice. Of relevance as well are Michael Camille's criticisms of studies of the history of visuality, his notion that these studies lump together medieval ways of seeing into an "Edenic, free-floating era before the 'Fall' into the 'real world' of Renaissance perspectival vision."[3]

I begin by considering how the spaces of the cathedral, panorama, and motion picture auditorium inscribe spectacle as well as evoke spectacular reactions in their respective audiences. I am interested here in how each medium encapsulates the idea of spectating as a form of pilgrimage and how in each aesthetic forms and discourses position spectators. Are there ways of seeing that are determined by the period eye, or might more fluid models of visuality across time and place be imagined? What did pilgrims and other spectators hope to achieve by visiting these spaces, and how did the spectacle they encountered shore up their belief? Given the impossibility of knowing whether modern spectators responded in the same ways to religious artifacts as their thirteenth century contemporaries, as art historian David Freedberg has argued, we can nevertheless still explore, in Freedberg's words, "why images elicit, provoke, or arouse the responses they do…and why behavior that reveals itself in such apparently similar and recurrent ways is awakened by dead form."[4] If conjecture is the only tool available to the analyst of such historically distant and ephemeral practices as spectatorship, in the case of critical and popular responses to Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ,* we can, as Michel de Certeau reminds us in The Writing of History, "tentatively analyze the function of discourses which can throw light on [our] question" since these discourses, "written after or beside many others of the same order," speak both "*of* history" while inescapably "already situated *in* history."[5]

More specifically, I argue that historical spectators were as intrigued and frequently moved by two- and three-dimensional representations of the crucifixion encountered in medieval cathedrals and nineteenth century circular panoramas as were contemporary viewers of Mel Gibson's *The Passion.* While the Christian studies scholar Amy Hollywood's argument that film is a "radically different genre from the stories, prayers, and relatively static devotional images produced during the Middle Ages" is reasonable, it fails to acknowledge the echoes of a medieval aesthetic across time, and her claim that Gibson's film produces an "intensely cor-

poreal meditative reenactment of the Passion" insinuates that nonfilmic media cannot deliver such a response. Hollywood also admits elsewhere in her essay that as *The Passion of the Christ* draws to a close, the images become increasingly static, resembling "medieval and early modern religious paintings, sculptures, woodcuts, and manuscript illuminations derived from and often used as pictorial aids to the meditation on Christ's Passion."[6]

Thus the space between the religious spectacle and the spectator—ways in which worshippers are invited to project themselves into the image or the breakdown of distinctions between witness and image—will be closely examined here, especially the sensory appeal of religious iconography from the medieval period to the present. The return of a Gothic fascination with graphic violence in Gibson's version of *The Passion* is also considered, along with the representation of religious iconography as a form of spectacle that is both performative and immersive. I conclude by arguing that the resurrection serves as a useful metaphor for making sense of the cathedral, panorama, and motion picture, which in their own distinct ways all bring back the dead. Ironically, the resurrection receives short shrift in Gibson's *The Passion,* which should come as no surprise when we consider that medieval mystery plays, which also marginalized the resurrection, serve as the film's hypertexts (the Passion play tradition of the Oberammergau is another potent iconographic force in the film). According to theological historian John W. O'Malley, when Passion plays became popular from the end of the thirteenth century through the sixteenth century, a "common feature was the practical neglect of the Resurrection. The Stations of the Cross…were precisely that. They ended with the placing of Christ in the tomb."[7]

Some preliminary disclaimers are in order. In making these arguments, I am neither implying an ancestral link between churches, panoramas, and cinema nor attempting to construct a social history of religious spectatorship. While the architectonics of the cathedral, the panorama rotunda, and cinema auditorium have several common phenomenological aspects—one could argue that each constructs an experience for spectators premised upon a dialectic of belief versus disbelief and the notion of an absent presence—there is no teleological link between them. They are clearly historically unique ways of representing religious iconography, with their own ontologies, signifying practices, and ideologies. Second, while this essay is concerned exclusively with Christian iconography and deals with a highly controversial film, I am not claiming that Christian image-making and its attendant ideologies offer unique or superior examples of religiously derived discourses of spectacle, immersion, and interactivity.

Other Worldly Spaces: The Architectonics of the Church, Panorama Rotunda, and Multiplex Theater. Gothic cathedrals were a response to the desire for a building design capable of evoking a religious experience, "the representation of supernatural reality," in the words of the art historian Otto von Simson.[8] The Gothic style began to take root under the Abbot Suger in the Benedictine
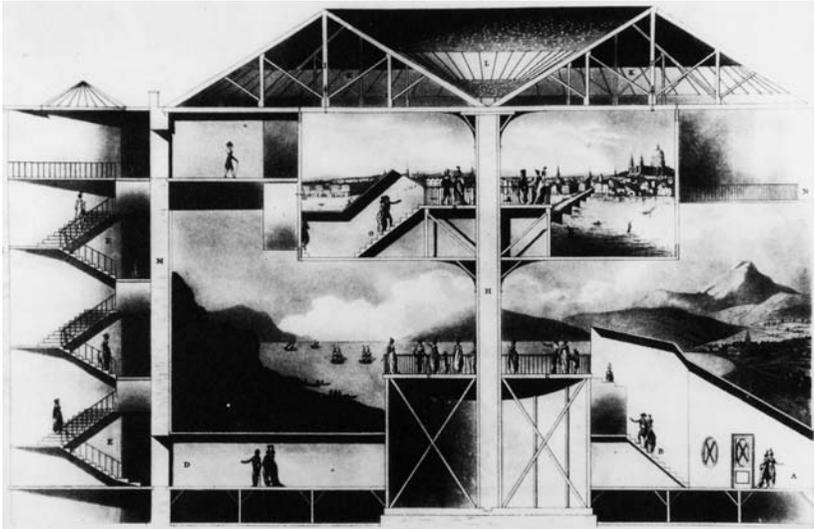
Figure 1. Cross section of Robert Barker's Panorama.

abbey church of Saint-Denis in the early-twelfth century, quickly spreading to the cathedrals of Noyon, Senlis, Laon,and Paris.[9] Platonic ideas of order, mathematical precision, and cosmic beauty dominated, and the principles of arithmetic and geometry inscribed in the physical design of the cathedral invited medieval spectators to intuit the order of the cosmos.[10] Von Simson examines the experience inspired by the cathedral sanctuary in his study of Gothic architecture: less *what* the Gothic Cathedral stands for than *how* it represents the vision of heaven, how as "enraptured witnesses to a new way of seeing," medieval worshippers would have "experienced" (in a religious and metaphysical sense) a divine presence as signified by the architecture, light, iconography, and the exterior and interior design of the building.[11] Gothic art was, as medieval art historian Michael Camille states, "a powerful sense-organ of perception, knowledge, and pleasure."[12] The transcendental truth that medieval worshippers sought from the architectural design of medieval cathedrals, that "mystical correspondence between visible structure and invisible reality" that von Simson speaks of, found an echo in the circular panorama patented by Robert Barker in 1787.[13]

From the Greek "pan," meaning "all," and "drama," meaning "view," panoramas (figure 1) were among the earliest (and most commercially successful) forms of mass visual entertainment, going in and out of fashion throughout the nineteenth century.[14] A large-scale 360-degree painting was suspended from the interior walls of the specially designed circular building. At the center was a viewing platform (belvedere), reached by a flight of stairs; as the art historian Lee Parry has noted, "the viewer's eye was intended to be directly opposite the horizon line of the painting." With nothing within which to locate the painting, the spectator

Figure 2. Henrik Mesdag Panorama in The Hague, one of the few extant nineteenth century panoramas, showing the vellum canopy above the viewing platform.

was more likely to accept the illusionism of the visual field than if the painting had been conventionally framed and exhibited. Unlike the frame, which functions as a window onto an illusionistically rendered space, the panorama attempted to create the sensation of the spectator's physical relocation into the center of such a space.[15] The *vellum* (an umbrella-like canopy over the spectator's head) and bottom of the painting were concealed by a cloth of the same color stretching from the lower edge of the platform toward the bottom edge of the canvas (figure 2).[16] With a newly invested omniscience, the spectator was enveloped in an artificial reality in which all boundaries delimiting the real from the synthetic had been putatively eliminated.

Several factors make the panorama extraordinarily well suited to the delivery of immersive spectacle: first, the mode of spectatorship invited by its scale (unlike looking at panel paintings or photographs, spectators gazed at huge canvases that filled the space before their eyes); second, their status as technologies of virtual transport and invocation of presence as a constituent feature of the panoramic experience; and third, the quasi-religious nature of the exhibition space, the fact that the sense of wonder felt by the spectator and the hushed tones in which they spoke, were reminiscent of behavior one might find in a church. However, there

Figure 3. Painted roof of Exeter Cathedral showing flying buttresses and bosses.

are important differences in the organization of vision in each setting. The boundless vision characterizing the nineteenth century panorama and the seemingly infinite height of the cathedral roof, which gradually more than doubled from 22 meters to 48 meters over time, directed the spectator's gaze in different directions. While the cathedral drew the spectator's gaze upward to the heavens, to the flying buttresses of the roof (figure 3), in the case of the panorama, the eye is more likely to survey the painting in a horizontal sweep across the canvas, usually in a clockwise direction.[17] As Barker appreciated when he patented his *coup d'oeil*, the inner space of the panorama can be taken in with the turn of the head while the "grand and clear symmetry of the enclosing shell draws us into the center of the circle, the privileged position, beneath the 'eye' of the dome opening to a bit of the sky."[18]

The gargantuan proportions of the cathedral, especially the extraordinarily high ceiling, have more in common with the space of the contemporary IMAX theatre than that of the nineteenth century panorama, since in the same way that Gothic architecture invites an upward gaze to better appreciate the linear values, geometrical figures, and light that seems to filter through the Gothic wall, "permeating it, merging with it, transfiguring it," in von Simson's words, so too does the

Figure 4. March 1999 Liberty Science Center Poster illustrating the reverent gaze of the IMAX film spectators.

IMAX screen shift the viewer's focal direction slightly upward, requiring the head to be raised to take in the height of the screen.[19] This upward gaze is repeatedly inscribed in IMAX publicity, with the spectator represented as looking awe-struck not directly out at the screen, but upwards, toward the top of the frame, a rapturous gaze evoking a quasi-religious sense of plenitude at the awesome size and brilliancy of the image (figure 4).

At the same time, the panorama rotunda evinced a hailing function similar to that of the gothic cathedral, signaling to audiences from some distance that what lay inside was to be experienced as something unique, memorable, and uncanny. Gothic cathedrals were complex communicative structures, rising over the horizon like "three-dimensional sermons";[20] in similar ways to the panoramas and the great motion picture palaces of the 1920s, they were constructed as "advertisements in stone, heralding the promised glories of things to come."[21] The architectural design of these spaces bespoke a great deal about the nature of the experiences to be had within: spectacle and a heightened sense of immersion were not only expected but came to define the very nature of the overall religious experience.

The cathedral, the panorama, and the cinema all depend on the interplay of light and dark to create optimal viewing conditions: stained glass windows in

cathedrals require light to make the images legible, while light above the vellum in the panorama heightens the illusion of standing out of doors. In a similar manner, the transition in the cinema auditorium from house lights to darkness to brightly lit screen has an anticipatory function as spectators are cued to direct their full attention toward the screen and its imaginary signifiers (the darkened passageway in the panorama performs a similar function of transition). The experience of entering the multiplex to view Gibson's *The Passion,* while utterly familiar for the vast majority of viewers (although not for all, since this film drew people to the movies who had not attended in years), was an act of devotion. To enter a space and encounter phantasmagoric images is something the Christian faithful have done since time immemorial. But can locations that are designed primarily for entertainment purposes take on new identities when religious spectacle becomes the stock in trade? Before answering this question it is important to situate Gibson's *Passion* within a longer tradition of religious pilgrimage and become better acquainted with this religious blockbuster.

Witnessing Faith Gibson Style: Mimesis, Visual Excess, and the Pleasure of Pilgrimage. Mel Gibson's *The Passion* opened on Ash Wednesday 2004 with Hollywood's highest-ever February weekend, making over $84 million in over 3,000 theaters (including $20 million on its opening day). By the end of the month U.S. box office receipts reached the $300 million mark, and, according to Tim Beal and Tod Linafelt, authors of *Mel Gibson's Bible,* a scholarly anthology published in response to the film, by mid-June, the film had grossed $370 million,[22] almost as much as *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King's* $377 million. Within a month of *The Passion's* Holy Week opening in Italy it had made $25 million, and the film broke box office records in Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. Two months after its opening, Gibson's film could claim the honor of being the year's highest grossing film worldwide, having earned a remarkable $608 million.[23] Made with $25 million of Gibson's money (and by his own production company, Icon Distribution Inc., formed after the film was turned down by the major Hollywood studios), *The Passion of the Christ* became a box office goliath.

The Passion of the Christ is a heavily intertextual film, evoking references to Gibson's acting oeuvre, action-adventure films, the Oberammergau, medieval art, and mystery plays. For many audience members and film critics, however, *The Passion* most resembled a gothic horror film hyperbolized for a violence-numbed contemporary audience, its meanings overdetermined by the larger geopolitical instability triggered by the U.S. occupation in Iraq and the Bush administration's crusade to remake the Middle East. Indeed, Camille's claim that medieval images were "so much more powerful, moving, and instrumental, as well as disturbing and dangerous than later works of art" offers an ominous link to Gibson's film. But it is important to remember that *The Passion of the Christ* is also an idiosyncratically *Gibson* film. The "crowd of modern moviegoing sinners in need of a dose of shock and awe" as *Entertainment Weekly's* Lisa Schwartzbaum describes the film's

audience, are invited to read the film as a personal penance. Additionally the film seems to exorcise Gibson's obsessions and demons, including his near-total conversion to a form of Orthodox Judaism during a six month stay in Israel when he was 18. Gibson's religious biography is recounted in Richard L. Rubenstein's essay "Mel Gibson's Passion," although it was originally reported by Jean Cohen in *The Jerusalem Post* in March 2004.[24] In 1974, Gibson stayed at the Kibbutz Degania, and, according to two friends, he started attending Sabbath services, eating only kosher food, and dressing in traditional black garb. When Gibson took conversion classes to become an Orthodox Jew, he assumed the Jewish name Moshe. It was only after Gibson was lured back to Australia by his father Hutton, who lied about his mother's imminent death from cancer and locked Gibson in a room for two and a half weeks, that he renounced Judaism and adopted his father's brand of ultra-orthodox Catholicism. Some observers viewed this period in Gibson's life relevant in making sense of *The Passion of the Christ,* especially in relation to the representation of Jews in the film. Gibson's "identity," as media scholar Toby Miller has pointed out, is an extremely complex social sign, a combination of the nineteenth century Irish larrikin (a white, male, uneducated, antiauthoritarian "lad") and its antithesis, the educated frat boy. Also part of Gibson's on-screen and off-screen personae are in Miller's words the "avengeful father/Messianic role in the *Mad Max* cycle and in *Braveheart,* the right wing real estate magnate, and oleaginous businessman."[25] Notwithstanding Gibson's complex, to put it mildly, public and private personae, and his recent anti-Semitic outburst following a DUI incident in July 2006, Christian fundamentalist audiences flocked in the thousands to get to screenings as soon as the film opened."

Many evangelical church congregations block-booked seats for Sunday screenings, inviting their clergy to worship before a celluloid altar. Two million dollars of advanced ticket sales for the film were generated by Christian churches that booked eight hundred theaters for two days before the film's official Ash Wednesday release.[26] Discussion of the film made repeated reference to its transformative power, the ability to turn the multiplex cinema into a sacred pilgrimage site, not unlike a church or cathedral. In the San Francisco area, members of the Paradise Baptist Church handed out cards to moviegoers inviting them to come and discuss the film at their local church. Peter Steinfels, the *New York Times* religious columnist, confessed that he could not understand the film's critics' puzzlement at the widespread popularity of *The Passion,* since viewers were "bringing to the film a whole store of religious beliefs and emotions, embracing and kindly as well as apocalyptic." According to Steinfels, "these people are not simply going to a movie; they are going to church,"[27] a point shared by Beal and Linafelt, who argue that for some viewers "the film has been elevated to the status of cinematic scripture, simultaneously creating and representing a shared religious experience and communion…a [form of] religious sacrament."[28] However, other critics rejected the transformation thesis; *Entertainment Weekly* critic Owen Gleiberman argued that Gibson "presents his torture-racked vision of Jesus' last 12 hours on

Figure 5. Poster for the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* panorama in St. Anne de Beaupré, Quebec, c. 1895.

CYCLORAMA

OF

JERUSALEM

— ON THE DAY OF

The Crucifixion.

THE GRANDEST

Permanent Exhibition of the Nineteenth Century.

— AT —

STE-ANNE DE BEAUPRE
SINCE 1895.

LOCATED IN THE LARGE ROTUNDA,

On the pier near the Railway Station

— Close in the winter time —

15c
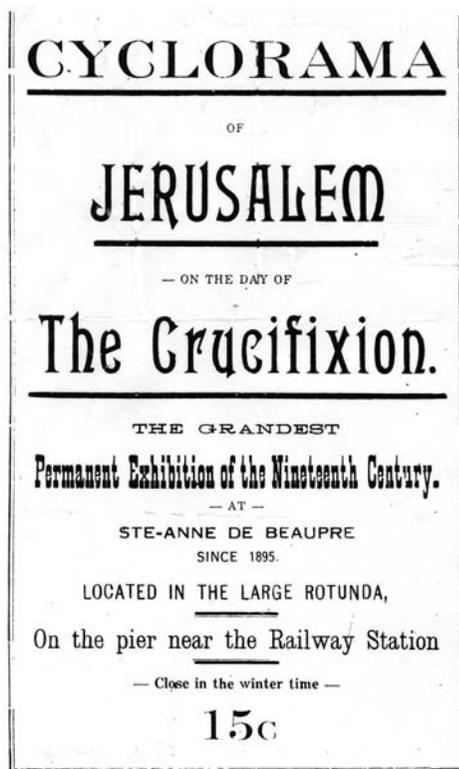
earth as a sacred form of shock therapy," a way of getting at the "scary, heightened, present-tense fever of Jesus' suffering."[29] Moreover, the radicalism of Jesus's gospel of endless love and sacrifice evoked in so much religious iconography, including *The Cyclorama of Jerusalem,* is absent in *The Passion.* It is, as Schwartzbaum contended, "Far from heaven. As a call to faith it's grim and numbing, an incitement to revenge rather than inspiration to lead a godly life by loving one's neighbor, whatever that neighbor's god."[30]

Notwithstanding these critical reservations, for many spectators, *The Passion* transformed the cinema auditorium into an ad-hoc place of worship, a pilgrimage site replete with popcorn and supersized drinks. In each of several distinct religious journeys—flocking to Chartres cathedral in the fourteenth century, wending one's way to the *Crucifixion* panorama in St. Anne de Beaupré outside Quebec City in 1895 (figure 5), and boarding a church-sponsored bus to attend a local multiplex in 2004—the overt religious content of the representations on display, coupled with the sensation of religious witnessing, informed the audience's response.

However, I intend neither to homogenize audiences nor to underestimate their critical faculties in rejecting, for example, the overt anti-Semitism or violence of Gibson's film. My point is simply that there is a sense of *déjà vu* in the intense

reactions engendered in their respective audiences by the Gothic cathedral, cruci-fixion panorama, and *The Passion.* Recognition of the role of spectacle and a sense of the uncanny in each space, this "where have I felt like this before?" sensation, privileges an embodied form of spectatorship that the film theorist Vivian Sobchack defines as a "radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble.*"[31] This effect may have expressed itself in a heightened sense of antici-pation, an expectation that what will be encountered resided in that liminal zone between reality and fantasy. The anticipation of seeing *The Passion,* for example, surfaced repeatedly in the discourse surrounding the film—one devout Catholic said that she'd been "waiting over a year," while the church-sponsored group view-ings seem to validate the viewing-as-pilgrimage quality of the film's reception.

But *The Passion's* reverent pilgrims to the "multiplex shrine" only dimly echo the twelfth century epoch of pilgrimages and the Crusades, when individuals undertook long, hazardous journeys across "the threshold that separates the known from the unknown, the customary from the wonderful."[32] As David Morgan points out in *Visual Piety,* the Franciscan practice of *via crucis,* observing the fourteen stages of the cross while on a pilgrimage, "amounted to the perfect-ing of a saint's imitation of Christ."[33] Marked as a devotee by dint of being on a pilgrimage, the reenactment of the Stations of the Cross during the journey invest-ed the pilgrimage experience with another layer of spirituality; upon reaching the journey's end, pilgrims and crusaders alike crossed the border from the terrestrial into the holy, a sacred space where relics, such as pieces of the cross, replicas of the Veronica (the cloth given to Jesus on his way to Golgotha and also known as the *vernicle* or the *sudarium,* meaning cloth for wiping sweat), or even relics pur-porting to be the baby Jesus's foreskin became objects of veneration.[34]

We should also not lose sight of the larger cultural context in which ideas about performance in the Middle Ages circulated, since representations of the Passion have *always* provoked the ire of religious leaders, especially thirteenth century iconophobes John Wycliffe and his successors, the Lollards, who wanted to see the church return to a more primitive (pure) state. Not only was there a "degree of medieval theoretical self-consciousness about performance" as Glending Olson argues, but medieval culture itself was "not monolithic in its views of performance," and representations of the Passion were seen as especially prob-lematic in terms of performers bringing the role of Christ to life.[35] According to Olson, "a basic Christian distinction between wicked, human, and spiritual play obtained widespread cultural currency during the time," and that while "much sig-nificant thought…was concerned with mimesis, even more is concerned with questions of purpose and social role, the kinds of questions that one asks particu-larly about performance, where the relationship between presentations, response, and context are so immediate and perceptible."[36]

Even the act of pilgrimage, as the case of the medieval mystic extraordi-naire and "autohagiographer" Margery Kempe so vividly illustrates, could be a

performative—albeit dangerous—experience, where constructions of self are determined (or possibly overdetermined) by the outward display of religious fervor (in Kempe's case, uncontrollable crying and erotic envisioning of the body of Christ) a masquerade of sorts where one "becomes" a pilgrim, in part, through pilgrimesque behavior and the purchase of relics on the journey.[37] If the sacred reality medieval men and women sought in their encounter with religious emblems were ineffable, it could nevertheless be made present in the veneration of saints and their relics.[38] As David Morgan argues, "just looking upon relics afforded the forgiveness of sin."[39] In an era where commodity fetishism and the accumulation of material wealth and products promising to radically enhance our lifestyles has largely replaced the worship of relics, it is striking to note the return of the relic in the religious merchandising spawned by *The Passion,* including pewter crucifixion nail necklaces, replicas of the ones used in Gibson's film, offered for $16.99.[40]

Pilgrims to medieval cathedrals and shrines would have traveled long distances—measuring distance not in miles but in number of days or weeks it took to reach their destination, making several stops on the way and greatly anticipating the spectacle that lay ahead. Living spaces for most people in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries consisted of dark, cramped, smoke-filled huts, in sharp contrast to what they would have encountered upon entering the doors of Chartres. More recently, most of the spectators who visited the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* crucifixion panorama in St. Anne de Beaupré in Quebec over the past century were pilgrims visiting the famous St. Anne church and shrine, which still attracts 1.5 million tourists and pilgrims every year. Celebrated for its curative powers— in 1658 a disabled workman was cured while working on the site—the centerpiece of the church is its basilica, which features intricate mosaics, stained glass, and a bone relic from St. Anne's forearm that was donated to the church by Pope John XXIII in 1960.[41]

Audiences eager to see *The Passion* had far fewer logistical and geographical hurdles to surmount: round the clock screenings and multiplexes showing the film on all of their screens were preceded by an intense direct marketing campaign by Icon Films.[42] A total of 50,000 promotional DVDs were sent to clergy around the country asking that they be played for the congregations; a Web site supplied churches with hundreds of posters and postcards, and some 15,000 religious leaders were invited to advance screenings and 300 Passion summit meetings.[43] Audience groups negotiated the meanings of *The Passion* through a vast web of intertextual references, including Gibson's ABC *Primetime Live* interview conducted by Diane Sawyer, which, according to Nielsen Media Research, drew 17 million viewers, the most for a non-sports hour on that network since *Stephen King's Rose Red* in 2002. According to Elaine Dutka, writing in the *Los Angeles Times,* among newsmaker interviews, the show ranked No. 1 in the key demographic of adults 25 to 54, edging out Michael Jackson's *60 Minutes* interview in November.[44]

The pilgrimage quality of *Passion* spectatorship was the antithesis of the church-group organized pilgrimages to Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988, which brought the faithful to movie theatres not to attend the screening, but to protest what they considered to be a work of blasphemy and to heckle audiences (pilgrimage-as-protest is a common feature of religious fundamentalist groups, particularly around the subject of abortion). The controversy over Scorsese's *The Last Temptation* suggests the incendiary power of cinematic representations of theology; with a humanity (and latent sexuality) that outraged Christian fundamentalists, here was a celluloid Christ that was all too real for the wrong reasons.[45] The disputes over the meanings of Scorsese's *Last Temptation* were echoed in the polarized responses to Gibson's *The Passion,* although there were few reports of organized demonstrations by the film's most outspoken critics.[46]

The act of pilgrimage is a highly symbolic one, the journey shaped as much by the outward meanings attributed to it as to its inner resonances for individual travelers. The medieval mind was also preoccupied with the symbolic nature of the world of appearances: "everywhere the visible seemed to reflect the invisible."[47] But there is a phantasmagorical dimension to the relationship between sign (religious icon) and referent (God) that the thirteenth century pilgrim would have to tacitly understand. By renouncing itself as an absolute referent—one cannot empirically prove the existence of a divine or holy being—God exists in the mind of the believer in similar ways to the phantasm (neither exist in any material sense). This idea of God as an absent presence helps bridge the conceptual leap from thinking about spectatorial reactions to the religious iconography of medieval churches and to the panorama and motion picture. While it would be naïve to equate Christian Metz's cinematic imaginary signifier to an act of faith, there are, nevertheless, similar kinds of psychic investments spectators of religious iconography, panoramas, and cinema are invited to make.[48] A common feature of spectacular image-making is the idea of the whole exceeding the sum of its parts, offering the spectator a liminal experience that hovers between real and unreal, here and there, natural and supernatural.

What the medieval icon, panoramic painting, and motion picture share in common, on a phenomenological level at least, is their power to transform abstract ideas and representations of the world into a decipherable visual language that can be decoded by the spectator within an enclosed space (church, rotunda, or auditorium). Furthermore, over the centuries, audiences witnessing spectacular religious iconography did not simply catch on to the notion of the affective power of religious representation but had been exposed to the *idea* of images standing in for something absent (i.e., God) and thus being capable of eliciting powerful reactions (the Eucharist is a classic example of this) for a very long time. During a Medieval Passion play (or Gibson's film) awareness of the performance as staged, while simultaneously "real," defines the experience as one of constant oscillation between two states of being. I am thus arguing that the suspension of disbelief

Figure 6. Taddeo Gaddi's paintings in the basilica of the Baroncelli Chapel in Sante Croce, Florence.

requisite for understanding cinema was also necessary for religious believers walking into a medieval cathedral in the thirteenth century or the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* in 1895; for some people at least, while in these architectural spaces, "seeing is *believing.*" The organization of vision in a cathedral shares something in common with the ways of seeing in cinema. For example, the organization into narrativized scenes of key iconic moments depicting the events surrounding Christ's crucifixion is called the Stations of the Cross and refers to a series of fourteen crosses, usually accompanied by images, representing the Passion and its aftermath that developed in the Middle Ages as a devotional substitute for actually following the Via Dolorosa (Christ's route from Jerusalem to Calvary). In addition to representing an event, each station signifies the actual site where an event took place and was located along the walls of a church or chapel, outdoors such as on a pilgrimage site, or wayside shrine, or in a freestanding group.[49] The Stations of the Cross require spectators to have a tacit understanding of the principles of editing, as each station is a tableaux standing in for a fully formed linear narrative.

Taddeo Gaddi's paintings in the basilica of the Baroncelli Chapel in Sante Croce, Florence, for example (figure 6), a richly decorated private space where wealthy merchant families were commemorated, is composed of rectangular

images organized around a central window that resemble the edited scenes one might find in a film. Besides representing emblematic moments from the Nativity, the images painted around the lancet windows are also concerned with light: the Annunciation of the Virgin, the flash of light awakening the shepherds, and the Magi kneeling before a vision point to the association of light with revelation and serve as a visual compliment to the light streaming through the actual window.[50]

The Gothic cathedral, panorama, and motion picture auditorium all employ technologies for "engaging beholders in certain visual forms," whether stained glass windows, sculptural art, intricately carved ceiling bosses, misericords, frescoes, etc.[51] Each is concerned with a suprareality, a reality beyond the experiential grasp of the average person. (According to von Simson, "cathedral architecture was designed and experienced as a representation of an *ultimate* reality.")[52] However, there is an important difference in how each form functions as a signifying practice; as Simson notes, "the tie that connects the great order of Gothic architecture with a transcendental truth is not that of optical illusion" (how can an architectural space be read as an "image" of Christ?) but rather Christian symbolism, or more accurately, the concept of analogy (the degree to which God can be discerned in an object).[53] As an architectural "language," the Gothic style developed local dialects, all of which strove to capture the ultimate reality of Christian faith, the "symbol of the kingdom of God on earth."[54] IMAX films, on the other hand, are renowned for taking spectators on virtual voyages to places they may never visit in real life (the summit of Everest, the International Space Station, the wreck of the Titanic) and for touting the simulacrum as being at least as good as, if not an improvement upon, the actual thing (this was also a common marketing trope in nineteenth century panorama promotion). While this "reality" is markedly different in each representational form, it nevertheless points up a shared interest in the exhibition site as a "means to grasp the useable."[55] Like the Gothic cathedral, IMAX film likes to think of itself as a transcendental experience, both in terms of its subject matter and visual excess; as von Simpson argues, "[F]or medieval men and women the passing over the threshold that separates the known from the unknown, the customary from the wonderful, meant the passing from the human to the sacred sphere."[56] Are IMAX films today's equivalents of the pious journeys made by countless medieval spectators? Probably not. But they have taken on a hallowed quality inasmuch as they promise to deliver us closer to an emblematic "truth" about some aspect of the natural world, aiming to raise ecological awareness, or at the very least pearls of wisdom about life and the universe.

Elaborating objects and architecture into a visual style that bespoke a coherent sacred experience was the function of much Gothic art, a point underscoring the centrality of sight and vision in medieval cosmology. These technologies of wonder foreground the act of looking as an intrinsic part of the experience; for medieval spectators, the icon engendered a corporeal gaze and a haptic quality, "a look that touches" and that offers a stimulus for an identification with the suffering Christ, through the *imitatio Christi* in which the body "participated in an

integrated devotional practice of imitating Christ, of imagining him in one's own body."[57] But how were spectators invited to take up certain stances both literally in terms of prostrations and figuratively within the scopic regimes of medieval visuality? What were the defining features of the spectacle that greeted audiences upon entering their respective exhibition sites? It is to the representation of the Crucifixion and its shifting iconography that we now turn.

The Revered Gaze: Spectatorship as Witnessing

> "A torture film of singular blood and brutality."[58]
> "A profoundly medieval movie…"[59]

Medieval art had a highly codified way of representing *terra firma* and the celestial heavens; the rules governing the representation of angels, devils, saints, and the natural world were tacitly understood by medieval spectators.[60] A circular nimbus placed vertically behind the head, for example, expressed sanctity. The *varietas* or pictorial richness of images incorporating flowers, animals, and architectural structures left an imprint on beholders, who, with varying degrees of sophistication, mined images for their symbolic value. Palimpsests were the order of the day; even time was multilayered, with past, present, and future at Chartres, for example, coexisting "simultaneously in the visual integration of the three doorways," the movement of time organized vertically as one's gaze follows the columns upwards.[61] The rules and pleasures elicited by medieval art were by no means simple, however; according to art historian Frank Kendon, "Medieval art had humor, horror, the grotesque, and a quaint expressive ugliness" all of which made it a highly expressive art form.[62] Few would disagree with Kendon's summoning of horror and the grotesque as fitting adjectives; indeed, "medieval" is widely used as a synonym to characterize an experience that is gruesome, brutalizing, or at the very least unpleasant.

If one accepts Morgan's argument that "the act of looking" is itself inextricably bound to one's religious identity and "constitutes a powerful practice of belief," it is possible to see how submitting one's gaze to an image of Jesus nailed to the cross can be read as an act of visual piety. But when was the crucifixion first represented in the visual arts, and what impact did the gradual introduction of more graphic realism have on the spectator's reactions to the image of suffering?

It is in the Carolingian period, ca. AD 1000–AD 600, that we first see a desire on the part of Christians for a visualization of the crucifixion, and it was during this period that the image of the dead Christ on the cross first made its appearance in the west; indeed, as Hahn points out, "although the contemplation of the cross was a much-recommended visual exercise, its promise was limited."[63] However, representations of the crucifixion during this period were not in the least bit concerned with realism or narrative; as Kendon notes, Christ's death was represented from a doctrinal and passive point of view with "no attempt at expressing anguish." Fully robed and lying, as opposed to being nailed, to the cross, the crucified Christ is shown alone and in no apparent discomfort.

Figure 7. "Man of Sorrows" representation of Christ crucified by Meister Francke, c. 1420.

However, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries usher in two new developments: first, a desire to represent the crucifixion with heightened verisimilitude via the "Man of Sorrows" trope (figure 7), including, as religious art historian Gertrud Schiller points out in her study of Christian iconography, a shift toward extending the realism to the reactions and emotions of those who witnessed the event, and second, an interest in giving expression to Mary's suffering as she becomes a second object of meditation on the Passion.[64] Schiller sees this as a pivotal moment in the history of Christian art: "Biblical events are no longer interpreted; they are brought home to the spectator in a personal, visual confrontation. This relationship, in which the believer, in his [sic] meditations, follows Christ's way to the Cross, is reflected in pictorial realism."[65] Christ's body is no longer fully robed, his genitals are covered only by a loincloth, and bleeding wounds inflicted by the crown of thorns and sword insertions are increasingly depicted. The representation of blood and greater emphasis on physical pain are connected not only to the veneration of Holy Blood, as Schiller points out, but part of a larger shift toward more realistic depictions of the crucifixion; as Kendon argues: "The denuding of the body of Jesus proceeds: men began to study the anatomy of agony.... His head droops; blood issues from the five wounds; his body sags under its own weight; the

crown of thorns is added; and the abdominal muscles reveal the intensity of his suffering."[66]

But as Camille notes (echoing medievalist Mary Carruthers), this shift must be understood not simply as part of a move toward heightened verisimilitude in the Middle Ages, but as inextricably bound to the notion of memory as affect; thus "it was not so much that the image of Christ as the 'Man of Sorrows' was 'realistic' that made this striking new image such a resonant one, but the fact that the emaciated body, the blood, the gaze of the suffering man/God carried them physically into the mind."[67] One cannot help think that this desire to imprint the image of Christ on the cross as an indelible sign of ultimate sacrifice and suffering was also an important goal for Mel Gibson's *Passion,* beyond the hyperrealism of the brutalized body; for many Christian viewers of the film, the emblematic imagery certainly heightened the devotional quality of the experience.

Notwithstanding this epistemic shift in visualizing the crucifixion, two other major influences have shaped the history of imaging Jesus Christ up to *The Passion of the Christ*: on the one hand, a Eurocentric bias in the suppression of Jesus's ethnicity as a first century Palestinian Jew; and second, what Morgan sees as a "dense intericonic space" that can be traced to the fourth or fifth centuries. Morgan's argument that every representation of Christ is part of an "interpretation of an ongoing tradition of imaging Jesus" seems especially relevant in the case of Gibson's *Passion,* since Gibson eschews contemporary conventional constructions of Jesus à la Warner Sallman, whose 1940 *Head of Christ* and *Sacred Heart of Jesus* have become "powerful symbols in American Protestant and Catholic piety," and instead reaches back to the medieval period.[68] Furthermore, Morgan's observation that each image is "tailored to the situation of an image maker, the market that manufactures and disseminates the image, and the public that beholds it" suggests both Gibson's exploitation of the *Braveheart*-inspired, pumped-up masculinity that is a defining feature of *The Passion* and his own brand of orthodox Catholicism.

That Gibson was drawing upon a medieval sensibility in depicting the final twelve hours of Christ's life is obvious and became something of a *leit motif* in the film's critical discourse. For example, British critic Deborah Orr felt that Gibson's "dubious achievement" was to have "married the aesthetics of medieval obsession with the unflinching shock values of popular culture," while Jeff Simon of the *Buffalo News* felt as if Gibson "wanted to take his audience back before the Renaissance to the gore of artistic medievalism."[69] Jonathan Romney, writing in the British *Independent,* went the furthest in evoking the medieval referent when he argued that "With its punishing sensibility, the film does nothing for cinema…except to help us imagine how things might have been if the *art form had been invented in the eleventh century.*"[70] Peter Steinfels offered a more nuanced reading when he argued that "the Passion-centered spirituality [that] arose in the Middle Ages and is therefore all too easily dismissed as medieval… was kept alive in the hymns and devotions of some strands of Protestantism but

especially in the mystical fervor and visual imagery of Counter-Reformation Catholicism."[71]

Transformed into "live-action tableaux," the ritualized Stations of the Cross serve as the film's dramatic architecture, especially for Catholic viewers who may be more responsive to the emblematic, reenactment formula used by Gibson. *World Magazine* critic Andree Seu, who analogized the experience of watching the film to Gibson taking us "by the hand along the church nave walls to pause between each stained glass eye and bow before Twelve Stations of the Cross, as once we children did on many a Good Friday," grasped both the narrative and coercive underpinnings of the film.[72] Moreover, Steinfels's argument that the "movie reignites religious embers that may have cooled over the years" is a reference both to Gibson's resignification of the Passion as an inexorably violent event, a "chamber of horrors gore that is unique in the history of Bible movies" in the words of MSNBC film critic John Hartl, and to the film's anti-Semitism and ecumenically suspect history.[73] While it is impossible to extrapolate responses to graphic depictions of Christ's suffering from the historical archive, in part because we are haunted, in Michel de Certeau's words, "by presuppositions…by 'models' of interpretation that are invariably linked to a contemporary situation of Christianity," we can nevertheless still draw some tentative conclusions on the nature of historical Passion spectatorship from the representations themselves; in other words, how artists chose to represent the Passion betrays a good deal about popular perceptions of such notions as realism, torture, suffering, spectacle, and the interpellation of the spectator into the scene.

"Enfleshed Sensations: Blood and More Blood." A number of reviewers criticized Gibson's representation of Christ's flagellation (figure 8) as an extreme and sadistic act of brutalization. For some viewers, the violence made it extremely hard to connect with the movie, since Christ was reduced, in the words of one viewer, to "this bloody creature."[74] First appearing in the twelfth century in sculpture, by the thirteenth century the flagellation was represented in stained glass, wall paintings, and most commonly on Passion altars.[75] By the Baroque period, relatively private meditations on Christ's suffering that had been the norm in the late Middle Ages moved out of the realm of the contemplative and into the public sphere of the church. For some viewers of Gibson's *Passion,* the "gobbets of flesh dislodged from Christ's back by the flagellators (that) stain the flagstones" pushed them over the edge, forcing them to reject the film as little more than a "sacramental splatter movie" representing Christ's suffering as heightened expressionist drama rather than naturalism.[76] Gibson showed little restraint in tempering the realism of the brutality, using cinema's mimeticism to, in the words of one critic, "crucify every viewer," evincing a love for carnage that outdid Matthias Grünewald's extremely graphic 1515 Isenheim altarpiece of the crucifixion.[77] Indeed, Grünewald is just one of several hypertextual/intertextual referents in the film that journalists identified. Jack Miles, for example, noted that the image of

Figure 8. The flagellation scene from Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (Newmarket, 2004).

Christ's hand contracting into a claw the moment the nail pierces is eerily similar to Christ's hand in the Isenheim crucifixion painting.[78]

Gibson credits some of his influences—Caravaggio, Mantegna, Masaccio, Piero della Fransesca—in the preface to the book accompanying the film. These painters' works, Gibson informs us, "were as true to their inspiration as I wanted the film to be of mine." However, as Gibson acknowledges, "it is one thing to paint one moment of The Passion and be true to it; it is quite another to dramatize the entire mysterious event."[79]

But in order to fully understand the impact of representational shifts in crucifixion iconography we must contextualize the Passion within a larger epistemological framework and consider the role of violence as a whole in medieval and early Renaissance culture. Medievalist Jody Enders points out that while violence has been a consistent feature of cultures going back at least to the first century, the question of "how audiences were to discern which violent, bloody struggles it was acceptable to enjoy is a question to which writers keep returning."[80] Thus in the United States at least, we find ourselves in a culture riddled with contradictions vis à vis the kinds of representations of violence considered acceptable versus those considered taboo, with the Christian right pressuring public officials to morally legislate the entertainment industry. While avoiding the claim that violent medieval dramatizations of the Passion are identical to contemporary performances or rituals of self-mutilation (such as the 1995 Easter celebrations that took place in the Philippines, where believers were crucified with thin nails that had been dipped

in alcohol), Enders does not deny that they both engender a "pleasure, obsession, or fascination eternally aroused in audiences."[81]

The representation of Christ's torturers sadistically enjoying their work, a trope that Gibson exploits to the hilt, goes back to early images of the flagellation scene and crucifixion; indeed, Olson refers to a medieval "sermon exemplum" uncovered by Siegfried Wenzel, which suggested that "performers taking on the role of Christ's torturers in a passion play enjoyed what they were acting out on stage, perhaps to the point that their revelry came to obscure or interfere with the presumably religious goals of the presentation."[82] Gibson's torturers come from a long lineage of gruesome, sadistic soldiers. In Arnoul Gréban's *The Mystery of the Passion: The Third Day*, the miniature image of the flagellation shows the soldiers energetically engaged in their work, almost appearing as if they are dancing upon the elaborate black and white tile pattern on the floor. Half way down the folio, the stage direction "They spit in his face" appears, proffering evidence that while the manuscript is primarily aimed at the reader, there are nevertheless ample indications of performative elements, the text not so much recording as *evoking* the idea of performance. Another stage direction reads: "here they beat him for a while without speaking."[83] Clearly we have no idea how long this beating might have ensued.

This troubling surplus of dangerous pleasure was one of the reasons why the performance of miracle plays came under attack in the classic antitheatrical manifesto *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (written sometime between 1380 and 1425) and characterized by Clifford Davidson as the "longest and most significant piece of dramatic criticism in Middle English." While the term "miraclis" in the document seems to refer to a broad range of dramatic activity and representation, religious dramas, especially performances of the Passion, are singled out as "utterly reprehensible."[84] Medievalist Garth Epp goes so far as to argue that it is concern with "lustis of the fleyssh," mentioned innumerable times in the *Tretise*, that really rubs the authors the wrong way; as Epp explains, the *Tretise* "treats theatrical performance and spectatorship as themselves inherently sexual activities, most dangerously so when they are centered on a representation of the actions and body of Christ…[which], unlike any other, must be seen as utterly antithetical to lechery; its theatrical representation cannot be seen to provoke erotic desire."[85]

Gibson's *The Passion* ironically brings us full circle with regards to an *imperative* element underlining both medieval *mystères* (mystery plays) and Gibson's film. Just as medieval religious theater saw no alternative to portraying physical suffering, since torture, rhetoric, and law were complicit in the construction of a medieval truth system that was as violent as it was theatrical, so too did Gibson, in his stated aim to "profoundly change people," see no other option than to "push viewers over the edge."[86] Consistent with his on-screen portrayals of avenging, sadomasochistic heroes, Gibson was acutely aware of the Janus-faced nature of violence and torture; as Enders argues, "whether the representations are dramatic, cinematic, literary, or juridico-political, nothing reviles the imagination more

than torture. Yet nothing titillates it more."[87] But can we really compare the Catholic born-again self-aggrandizing Gibson to a medieval dramatist's staging the Passion for a community performance? Or, more to the point, what does it mean in terms of furthering our understanding of the history of spectacle to compare the cinematic effects Gibson employs in order to represent Christ's suffering (including dramatic music and slow motion) with the theatrical effects of the medieval mystery play?

In the 1547 Passion play staged at Valenciennes, special stage effects were used to create the illusion of blood flowing from the bodies of the Innocents when they are massacred and from Christ's wounds in the crucifixion scene.[88] These illusions, as French medieval theater scholar Darwin Smith points out, would have been the responsibility of a prop master trained in stage effects, including the flash of light created with mirrors that appears on Christ's face after the transfiguration.[89] The appearance of blood loss was created via a mixture of vermilion and water added to a hydraulic system that moved the liquids from a barrel into pipes hidden behind the body of the actor playing Christ (the addition of different liquids would alter the pressure in the pipes and create the illusion of oozing bodily fluids). With blood seeping from every pore, "spattering upon the earth, such that the entire set 'glistens with blood,'" in the words of Enders, special effects masters in the Middle Ages performed "all manner of technological miracles…flesh-suits with pre-imprinted gash marks, unpeeled layer by layer and with great slight of hand as the scourging progresses. The brutality is so overwhelming that viewers feel they must turn away, yet they are compelled to watch this piece of instructional entertainment that has been provided by their culture, by their community, and by their church."[90]

Gibson was clearly not the first producer of a Passion play to rely upon special effects to generate shock, empathy, anger, and a twinge of pleasure in the spectator. He was most certainly not the first to promote the idea that "bloodshed and belief went hand in hand (or hand in fist) with graphic, spectacular violence."[91] The profusion of blood in *The Passion* would therefore have not been at all out of place in the *Mistère de la Sainte Hostie* held in Metz, France, in 1513, during which, as one contemporaneous spectator tells us, "there emerged a great deal of blood…until the whole center stage glistened with blood and the whole place was full of blood…And all this was accomplished by devices and hidden places."[92] And yet one crucial difference must be noted: sometimes the violence in Middle Ages performances was actually happening on stage, with stage directions for the Sainte Geneviève *Passion* specifying that "blows upon the body of Jesus must be genuine, not imitated." There is also uncorroborated mention of the possibility of condemned criminals substituting for actors so that they could be burned alive on stage.[93]

Expectation thus plays a huge role in the encounter between spectator and religious spectacle. When viewing religious spectacle, one *expects* a somatic engagement that could be as extreme as the *imitatio Christi* or as innocuous as

possessing an image of Christ that returns one's gaze. Each of these spectacular modes of representing the Crucifixion foregrounds an immersive and interactive gaze, the idea that the act of looking not only demands more of the spectator—a bodily engagement in the case of *imitatio Christi*—but somehow delivers more.[94] But there is an important difference here in theatrical stagings of Passion plays and versions rendered on film, differences that speak to the representation and consumption of flesh (and other modalities that I will not focus on here);[95] according to Epp, "in medieval English passion plays, Christ repeatedly, even insistently, offers his flesh for the gaze of others, both on and off the stage."[96] In the cinema, that flesh is transposed onto the screen via the magic of light, and the looking relations, while similar in terms of the construction of the gaze, are by no means identical. The "all-too-human body" of the Medieval Passion play actor on display "invites our collective gaze, and the meditative tradition of *imitatio Christi* invites our identification with that body's suffering," although in the case of the complete performances of the York plays, this would have resulted in no fewer than 24 actors playing the adult Christ in successive pageants, each in multiple performances, "one God in many persons," as Epp puts it.[97] "Seeing" Christ was neither a predictable nor consistent experience for either mystery cycles' audiences or those viewers of James Caviezel (voted one of the 50 most beautiful people in the world by *People* magazine in 2004).[98] Desiring Christ's body as an ecumenical sign told only half the story; identification with Christ's body, especially when that body was played by a large number of the town's young men, might have been based upon any number of variables, including how one's version of Christ matched up to the various body types, visages, homoerotic or heterosexual desire, or nondescript notions of "Christness."

In the discourse surrounding *The Passion*, the conventional protocol of viewing was often replaced by the idea of experiencing the film; for example, the film critic David Reinhardt said that "experienced would probably be a better word" than "saw" to describe his encounter with a film that came across as "more of a meditation than a movie."[99] A pastor quoted in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* offered a similar response when he opined, "I think what is very important to understand, having seen the film, is it is an *experience*. Like powerful art does, it moves you, it demands a response from you."[100] According to some press accounts, audiences purportedly did not leave the theatre until the final credit had rolled, and the only sound that punctured the eerie silence reported in many screenings was that of quiet sobbing (the other three women at the sparsely attended matinee I attended were visibly crying as they left the auditorium). The sobbing by Christian audiences during the brutal scenes was a response to "images deeply embedded in a collective religious imagination," in the words of religion studies scholar Karen Jo Torjesen, the source for such imagery originating "not with the early Christian martyrs but in the Irish monastic roots of medieval penitentiary piety."[101] Responses from viewers confirm these comparisons: "It was like being at the foot of the cross," said one spectator from Ohio, while another viewer from

North Carolina, compared watching the film to viewing television news footage of the burning Twin Towers in lower Manhattan.[102] By exploiting the religious iconography and aesthetic tenor of Medieval Passion plays, Gibson addresses us as self-doubters whose faith will be reaffirmed by this conversion film, although, as Susannah Heschel argues, the idea of the film converting nonbelievers is superseded by a quite different goal, namely, "to reveal those in its audience who are saved and those who are not."[103] Not all spectators, however, experienced the *Passion* in the same way, just as medieval spectators would have responded to Passion plays with their own sense of pathos, shock, horror, disbelief (or none of the above). What extant commentaries on medieval performance such as the *Tretise* reveal is that "medieval audiences were clearly aware of varied dimensions of the dramatic activity they saw" and that performances were complex enough in tone that they engendered harsh critiques, including the attacks on stagings of Christ Passion singled out in the *Tretise*.[104]

But there is one fundamental flaw in Gibson's "vision" that Gibson himself acknowledged. It was heavily influenced by Anne Catherine Emmerich's book *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which documents with excruciatingly gruesome detail her proto-cinematic "visions" of the Passion.[105] As Jody Enders points out in her essay "Seeing is Not Believing," "the very truths that violence holds to be self-evident by dint of its so-called realism are not evident simply because they are seen." If we accept Enders's basic premise that "religious faith is based on what people *cannot* see, unless they happen to bear witness to a miracle," equating verisimilitude with historical truth or fact is fundamentally misguided.[106] Our interpellation into the roles of eyewitnesses to a gruesome event— spectators of French Passion plays were actually called *témoins oculaires*—does not guarantee or authenticate the realism of the violence. When a viewer's "authentically powerful emotions feel like historical fact," and when the unfamiliar languages spoken in the film deliver a second dose of purported realism, chances are we will most likely get sucked into mistaking representation for reality; as Enders bluntly puts it: "not all the Latin or Aramaic in the world can transmute verisimilitude into truth or perspective into dogma. Contemporary audiences are in no better position to judge the alleged accuracy of these languages than were their medieval forebears."[107]

What the Aramaic and fifth century ecclesiastical Latin dialogue does accomplish in the film (the Roman soldiers, sociolinguists inform us, would have actually spoken Greek) is to privilege the film's image track and, coupled with the assertive editing, slow motion, digitally produced demons, melodramatic score, and repeated close-ups of Jesus's face, helps hone our attention to a heavily corporealized Christ (rather than a spiritually Incarnated God) that substitutes for his lack of interiority and psychological depth. A relatively small detail such as Jesus's lips (figure 9), which by the end of the film are grotesquely chapped, assumes a metonymic relationship to the representation of suffering as a whole. This also relates to William G. Little's reservations about the "matter of Incarnation" in the

Figure 9. Christ on his way to be crucified as depicted in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (Newmarket, 2004).

film, the way in which the "only aspects of the person with which the viewer is permitted familiarity are the body's surfaces and extremities: a swollen eye, matted tips of hair, gouged-out chunks of flesh, crucified hands and feet."[108]

That *The Passion of the Christ* offered viewers an experience that somehow transcended the protocols and pleasures of ordinary moviegoing should come as no surprise. Gibson's eschewal of point of view shots and his disavowal of identification with any specific character throughout the film means that, as Mark D. Jordan and Kent L. Brintnall argue, "the point of view is always slightly different from that of the disciples, Jesus, or Satan."[109] There is also something familiar in the references in the critical discourse surrounding Gibson's film to feeling immersed in the image or virtually present at the crucifixion. One only has to look at the history of crucifixion iconology to see that religious onlookers have long assumed the role of virtual witnesses to the event, identifying with the crying crowd at Golgotha, for example, or in the case of a painting of the Madonna and child, deeply moved by the sensation of Mary coming "toward us out of the picture."[110] Not only did Mary feel compassion for Jesus's suffering on the cross, but also *co*-passion, experiencing the event as if in her actual body.[111] Maia Morgenson's performance as Mary in Gibson's *Passion* corresponds closely to that of the twelfth century Passion play *Ludud de Passione* from The *Benediktbeuren Passion Play* in which Mary delivers such lines as "Was there ever such torment/And such terrible anguish?/Now perceive the torment, agony, and death/And the entire

body red with blood" (the accompanying stage direction reads "Again the Mother of the Lord, with every sort of lamentation, bewailing greatly, cries out to the weeping women, complaining vehemently").[112]

Countless accounts of how mystics, saints, and sometimes ordinary citizens communicated the Passion through their bodies attest to the performative nature of the Passion narrative, subject to diverse appropriations, including extension to the Last Judgment, and elision, to represent only the last twelve hours of Jesus's life as in Gibson's film. As R. N. Swanson observes, "Passion narrative structure allows individual events to be highlighted, or the isolation of particular sequences," although "different depictions, manifestations, manipulations, produce different responses, especially if further complicated by regional variations."[113] This point suggests that, while correspondences can be traced over time, the Passion story is an especially open text, not so much a blueprint for performance but a series of emblematic tableaux. The performance of the Passion narrative, especially in the case of devotional images involving representations of the instruments of the Passion (the *arm Christi*) including the hosts, chalice, and a pelican in piety, is to allow the devotee to "transport the Christ-who-suffered into the present, to become the Christ-who-suffers," so that the man of sorrows context shifts from that of the Passion to that of the Eucharist, from a past event to one that may bother present and future.[114]

Take, for example, the case of Elisabeth of Spalbeck from the thirteenth century, a woman who would "perform, all the major narrative events of the Stations of the Cross, ending with a kind of tableau representation of Christ's body crucified on the cross." The story of Elisabeth of Spalbeck reminds us of the intense corporeality surrounding the crucifixion narrative. Elisabeth's body became a performance text, her use of location, props, and ability to embody both the tormentors and the tormented heightening the theatricality and supernatural aura of the daily reenactment of Christ's flagellation and crucifixion. Her stigmata and bleeding from hands, feet, and side drew the attention of Cistercian Abbot Philip of Clairvaux, who wrote a report, or *vita,* on her behavior.[115] As Elisabeth's performance illustrates, the elicitation of an empathetic, if disquieting, response in witnesses to Elisabeth's hitting, hair pulling, self-starvation, catatonic episodes, and bizarre sounds, was the raison d'être of Medieval Passion cycles. As Morgan explains: "the task was to transform the pathos or suffering of Christ's Passion into a sensation of compassion—a suffering with—in the viewer. This new form of piety, effected though visual means, sought a vicarious participation in Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection."[116]

But there is also a functionalist dimension to this: according to Morgan, the rhetoric of immediacy was the visual equivalent of the textual notion of *sola scriptura,* the idea of God making himself apparent in certain privileged forms of representation. Thus, the idea that "images were an expeditious avenue of disclosure—an illiterate person's Bible—had…been absorbed into medieval epistemology."[117] The *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* echoes this idea of religious art

bearing the discursive weight of scriptural doctrine and is the subject of the final leg of this essay.

Looking Down on Jerusalem: Panoramic Vision of the Crucifixion. The *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* is testimony to the longevity of "art as handmaid to religion" idea that can be traced from the Middle Ages to the discourses surrounding Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ.* One of the conventional ways in which identification was solicited in Christian iconography was through the overt frontality of representations of Christ, who is often shown gazing directly into the eyes of the viewer, occasionally casting a downward gaze at the spectator as in religious statuary.[118] Vicarious participation in the final hours of Christ's life as represented in the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* (figure 10) is both similar to and different from Gibson's *Passion of the Christ.* Instead of privileging the crucifixion through size or location, it reconstructs this historical event in order to convey, in the words of the 1895 brochure accompanying the panorama, "the sense of reality to an episode, not just another religious painting, but a canvas that would bring alive a period in time [through] an illusion of depth that viewers feel they are among the crowd marching with Roman soldiers."[119] Through the immersive effects of the *trompe l'oeil,* the spectator feels copresent at this event, and yet the consistent long shot point of view around the circumference of the canvas marks the space as distinct from Gibson's *The Passion.* Conceived by the Munich artist Bruno Piglheim, who "decided that something should be done about public ignorance of daily life in Biblical times," especially the lack of attention devoted to landscape, customs, and dress, Piglheim commissioned the famous French panorama artist Paul Philippoteaux and five associates to complete the work, and Philippoteaux and two companions spent a year in Jerusalem gathering data and taking photographs. Four years in the making, the panorama toured European capitals, New York City, and Montreal before finding a permanent home in St. Anne de Beaupré in 1895. The *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* measures 110 meters long by 14 meters high and shares the distinction, along with two other French paintings, of being the largest painting in the world. After climbing the customary flight of stairs through a darkened passageway to reach the viewing platform, visitors stand on a 15-meter platform raised five meters off the ground. What the panorama gains in topographical accuracy and ethnographic similitude, it nevertheless loses in up-close graphic realism. A 1888 *New York Times* reviewer devoted as much attention to the spot selected by the artist from which to survey the landscape as he did to its culminating moment (we are told, for example, that "The point at which the spectator stands would, according to the painting, be near Jeremiah's cave or prison, for he faces the northern city wall, with the northern or Damascus gate"). This privileging of topography over other aesthetic detail is not unusual when we consider the panorama's close relationship to military mapping and surveying.

Unlike Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, one approaches the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* in the role of a distant observer, looking down upon the events occurring

Figure 10. *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* Panorama in St. Anne de Beaupré, showing the cathedral in the background.

on a single temporal plane (figure 11). The "here-and-nowness" of the scene is conveyed through the descriptive language, the reference the *Times* critic makes to Christ being on the cross "*just* after having breathed his last," the converted thief who "*painfully* turns his head," the "dark *threatening* clouds over the sky," and the Roman centurion "*pointing* his arm." Addressed as virtual time travelers, sightseers lining the city wall, we look down upon Jerusalem from a privileged vantage point in time and space. The present-tense quality of the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem* helps us process its effectiveness as an example of the kind of devotional image Swanson discusses. Images blur past, present, and even future; while we cannot assume that all spectators gaze upon the scene through the same presentist frame of reference, there is something about panoramic vision, I would argue, that heightens this sensation. Indeed, part of the pleasure of viewing the *Cyclorama of Jerusalem,* and a great deal of other popular religious art, may derive from, as Morgan writes in *Visual Piety,* a "correspondence between what the believer sees and what he or she wants to or expects to see…expressed in a number of operations (including) recognition, interactivity, projection, empathy, and sympathy."[120]

But this is quite different from viewing the crucifixion in Gibson's *Passion,* where via cinema's physiognomic scrutiny we see every bit of Christ's suffering from extremely close range. Nevertheless, to argue that comparisons cannot be made between cinema and the panorama because of cinema's capacity to manipulate time and space through editing is to miss the point; *The Passion* and *The Cyclorama of Jerusalem* construct deeply affecting spectacles that immerse audiences in the view, either by surrounding them, in the case of the panorama, or through heightened verisimilitude and shot construction in the case of film.

Figure 11. Detail of the Crucifixion from *The Cyclorama of Jerusalem* (1895) panorama.

The Spectrality of Devotional Imagery: Is Seeing Really Believing? The striking correspondences among medieval iconography, nineteenth century religious panoramas, and *The Passion of the Christ* do not evoke a consistent theological message or ideology so much as a suggestion of how vision, spectacle, and, above all, affect are discursively constructed and manipulated in each medium, how vision can engender a feeling of copresence so that "people feel themselves to be in a more direct relationship with the living God because of the imaginative power of newly animated images."[121] How else can we explain why so many spectators were deeply moved by *The Passion*? And while there is validity in Swanson's argument about the role of context as a key determination in Passion experiences— according to Swanson: "The response evoked by a triptych publicly displayed in a church will not match that by a miniature in a private Book of Hours…. A play watched and enjoyed will not produce the same mental state as a text meditated on…[and] [t]he domestic setting of a tapestry, the decorative function of a piece of jewelry, will likewise produce different responses, may lose all connotations of devotion, and pass into furniture"[122]—it runs the risk of eliding points of similarity across devotional speech acts whose utterances, while context-bound, are never completely overdetermined by that context. Shock, horror, pathos, anger, and peace all might be engendered by any one of the examples Swanson cites; as Gibson's film reminds us, we may have come full circle to the visceral reactions elicited by Medieval Passion plays. The metaphysics of the encounter between spectator and representation in each of these forms is reminiscent of Abraham Maslow's "peak experience," where emotions of "wonder, awe, reverence, humility,

surrender, and even worship before the greatness of the experience" are often reported. According to Maslow, "unitive consciousness" is a core element of "peak experience," a "sense of the sacred glimpsed *in* and *through* the particular instance of the momentary…the worldly."[123] Not surprisingly, the cathedral ranks high as a place likely to provoke a peak experience, especially given the strong (and familiar) associations between architecture and the sublime. The following description of visiting Chartres, although written by twentieth century philosopher F. David Martin, might easily paraphrase the experience of a medieval visitor to the cathedral:

> In…Chartres I was completely centered and at a standstill, and thus I felt the attraction and support of the earth beneath me much more strongly than when I was on the outside. I became more explicitly aware of my place, my here and now, as being secured by a power over which I had no control and which seemed strangely "other."[124]

Not surprisingly, the panorama often provokes a similar reaction in the spectator who, like the churchgoer, is awe-struck by the scale of the representation and architectural space. According to Maslow, organized religion is one of the ways in which peak experiences can be communicated to others, but whereas the fear of death tends to disappear in the peak experience, it is ever-present, I would argue, in the image of the crucifixion, the tragic highlight of the Passion. One might argue that death has served as a framing metaphor for these technologies of spectacle for quite some time and may be a useful way of drawing the themes of this essay together.

I have argued that all of these historically distinct ways of representing religious spectacle share one feature: they all offer spectators access to things beyond ordinary ways of seeing. For the devout, the knowledge to be gained from medieval art, a crucifixion panorama, or a film about the Passion is that of being copresent with a higher being or force, of feeling empathy, but most of all, of encountering spectacle unlike anything else one might come across in daily life.[125] What unites these three ways of seeing the Passion is that they transform theology into emotions and sensations (including pain, disgust, nausea, guilt, and exaltation) that are meant to bring us into closer communion with a Christian God.

And yet even the act of seeing is subject to historically specific connotative meanings. As the medievalist Clifford Davidson reminds us: "According to the understanding of vision prevalent in both learned and popular circles [in the middle ages], *seeing* meant coming into direct visual contact with the object, which if it were idolatrous would contaminate the viewer."[126] Seeing was no less potent in the testimonies of viewers leaving Mel Gibson's *The Passion* who saw flesh torn asunder and, if Gibson's aims were achieved, had their faith reaffirmed. When the steam has evaporated from the boiling pot of journalistic and scholarly rhetoric surrounding Gibson's *Passion,* what we are left with I believe is a residue of anxiety over mimesis itself and the burden of representing Christ's life.

The specter of death hangs heavily here, not only in the narrative of the Passion but in the very ontologies of these religious spectacles. The panorama

optically embalms its universe, while the presence of tomb sculpture and the repository of saintly relics in medieval cathedrals brings spectators quite literally into the company of the dead; death was commonly represented in the mystery cycles and celebrated in courtly poems, pageants, cities, and towns where the "Dance of Death" was popular.[127] Moreover, in addition to the apocalyptic ending of the Passion narrative, death is also given quasi-human form in *The Passion,* taking the form of a bizarre grim reaper/androgynous, milk-eyed devil who lurks in the shadows and floats in and out of the action, a performance by Rosalinda Celentano that Jack Miles describes as a "gray-faced, hollow-eyed terrorist…the most insinuatingly sinister Satan ever seen on screen."[128] But just as Christian faith depends upon a belief in the redemptive power of the resurrection to validate Christ's status as the Son of God, so too do these spectacles work the alchemy of religious representation by imbuing these scenes with life. The reception of these ways of seeing the Passion involves what Morgan calls "the magical sense of making the abstract present…render[ing] for viewers the ontological presence of someone or something."[129] While there is nothing especially sacred about a movie theatre ("temple of sin" would be a more apposite descriptor), a panorama rotunda, or even the bricks and mortar out of which the cathedral emerges, for the religiously devout, these physical spaces offer a locus for a sense-altering experience, each delivering shivers down your spine.

Notes

1. This essay does not compare the representation of Christ in Gibson's *The Passion* with other cinematic versions, since the history of Christ on screen has already been covered in several monographs, anthologies, and articles. Readers interested in that history could start with the following: R. C. Stern, C. N. Jefford, and G. DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); L. Baugh, *Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Like Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed, 1997); W. B. Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1997); R. Kinnard and T. Davis, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen,* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publications, 1992) F. A. Eigo, ed., *Imaging Christ: Politics, Art, Spirituality* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1991); and P. O. Brunstad, "Jesus in Hollywood: The Cinematic Jesus in a Christological and Contemporary Perspective," *Studies Theologica* 55 (2001): 145–56.
2. Pamela Sheingorn, "Gender, Performance, Visual Culture: Medieval Studies in the 21st Century" (lecture, Columbia University, February 15, 2006). I am grateful to Pam Sheingorn for exposing me to so much of the medieval primary and secondary literature referenced in this essay.
3. Michael Camille, "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing," in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance,* ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 198.
4. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1, 19.
5. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History,* trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 20.

6. Amy Hollywood, "Kill Jesus," in Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 164, 166.

7. John W. O'Malley, "A Movie, a Mystic, a Spiritual Tradition," *America* 190, no. 9 (March 15, 2004): 13.

8. Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), xvii.

9. Günther Binding, *High Gothic: The Age of the Great Cathedrals* (New York: Taschen, 1999). For more on the emergence of the term "Gothic" and its redolent symbolism, see 29–52.

10. Günther Binding, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 44.

11. Ibid., 13. Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London: Everyman Art Library, 1996), 12. For more on the background of Gothic as an emergent style, see 63–64.

12. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 11–12.

13. Ibid., 11.

14. For discussion of the panorama's relationship to the early cinema reenactment, see Alison Griffiths, "Shivers Down Your Spine: Panoramas, Illusionism, and the Origins of the Cinematic Reenactment," *Screen* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 1–33.

15. For more on panoramas, see Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1999); Ralph Hyde, *Panoramania! The Art and Entertainment of the "All-Embracing" View* (London: Refoil Publications in association with the Barbican Art Gallery, 1988); Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978); Mimi Colligan, *Canvas Documentaries: Panoramic Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century Australia and New Zealand* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2002); John Francis McDermott, *The Lost Panoramas of the Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Angela Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema and the Emergence of the Spectacular," *Wide Angle* 18, no. 2 (April 1996): 34–69; and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 149–76.

16. Evelyn J. Fruitema and Paul A. Zoetmulder, *The Panorama Phenomenon,* Catalog produced for the preservation of the Centarian Mesdag Panorama (The Hague: Mesdag Panorama, 1981), 18.

17. Binding, *High Gothic,* 87.

18. F. David Martin, *Art and the Religious Experience: The "Language" of the Sacred* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1958), 243.

19. Von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral,* 1.

20. Georges Duby, *The Age of Cathedrals: Arts and Society 980–1420* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 147.

21. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 28.

22. Another anthology exploring the film's religious, political, and philosophical implications is *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, the Controversy,* ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

23. Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

24. Jean Cohen, *Jerusalem Post,* March 12, 2004, cited in Richard L. Rubenstein, "Mel Gibson's Passion," 113–16. Rubenstein's essay is from Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 109–19.

25. Toby Miller, "Who Owns the Passion?" (symposium, organized by the Center for Religion and Media, New York University, March 12, 2004). Anti-Semite should also

be added to this list. In late July 2006, Gibson put the record straight regarding his anti-Semitic views, which he had denied infused *The Passion*. Arrested for DUI near Santa Monica, Gibson lashed out at the arresting officer, shouting "the Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world." Gibson blamed the anti-Semitic outburst on his addiction to alcohol and has been desperately trying to recuperate his image in the face of such disturbing evidence to the contrary. For a copy of the police report and insightful analysis of the incident, see http://www.slate.com/id/2146842/entry/0/.

26. C.W. Nevius and Joshunda Sanders, "Movies in the News: 'The Passion of the Christ,'" *The San Francisco Chronicle,* February 26, 2004, A13; Elaine Dutka, "'Passion of the Christ' to Be Given Wider Release," *Los Angeles Times,* February 20, 2004, C2.
27. Peter Steinfels, "Beliefs: In the end, does 'The Passion of the Christ' point to Christian truths, or obscure them?" *The New York Times,* February 28, 2004, A13.
28. Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 3.
29. Owen Gleiberman, "Faith Healer?" *Entertainment Weekly,* March 5, 2004, 46.
30. Lisa Schwartzbaum, "Faith Healer?" *Entertainment Weekly,* March 5, 2004, 47.
31. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 4.
32. Von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral,* 79.
33. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 63.
34. Gabriele Finaldi, *The Image of Christ* (London/New Haven: National Gallery Company Limited and Yale University Press, 2000), 58, 75.
35. Glending Olson, "Plays as Play: A Medieval Ethical Theory of Performance and the Intellectual Context of the Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge," *Viator* 26 (1995): 195, 200.
36. Ibid., 205, 207.
37. The term "autohagiographer" is Richard Kieckhefer's from his book *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); 6. Cited in Sarah Salih, "Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and *The Book of Margery Kemp,*" in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe,* ed. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (New York: Routledge, 2002), 122. For more on Margery Kempe, a "master performance artist" who cast herself as star of her visionary work *The Book of Margery Kempe,* see Nanda Hopenwasser, "A Performance Artist and Her Performance Text: Margery Kempe on Tour," in Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Zeigler, *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 97–131. Hopenwasser's bibliography is a wonderful resource for students of Kempe.
38. Von Simson, *The Gothic,* 164.
39. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 60.
40. Barbara Amiel, "Mel Gibson's 'Passion of Christ' is an Act of Faith, Not Hatred," The *Daily Telegraph,* February 23, 2004, 18.
41. Cleo Paskal, "Pilgrimage to Christorama," *Canadian Geographic* 121, no. 2 (March 2001): 98.
42. Patrick Ness, "A Prey to Temptation in the Bible Belt," *Sunday Telegraph,* February 15, 2004, 4.
43. The Web site is www.passionmaterials.com. Katy Kelly, "Scourging and Buzz," *U.S. News & World Report,* March 8, 2004, 45.
44. Dutka, "'Passion of the Christ' to Be Given Wider Release," *Los Angeles Times,* C2.
45. The literature on *The Last Temptation of Christ* is vast; notable discussions of the controversy surrounding the film and Scorsese's approach include Robin Riley, *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's* The Last Temptation of Christ (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Pam Cook, "The Last Temptation of Christ," in *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Film* (London: Routledge, 2005); four

article special section of *Film Comment* 24, no. 5 (September/October 1988); Kevin Fauteux, "The Final Portrait of Christ," *Journal of Religion and Health* 28, no. 3 (September 1989): 195–206; Clyde Haberman, "Last Temptation Creates Furor at Venice Festival," *New York Times,* September 8, 1988, 19; Elvis Mitchell, "Jesus Christ Movie Star," *New York Times,* September 22, 1988, 42; Meaghan Morris, "Of God and Man," *American Film* 14, no. 1 (October 1988): 44–49, Terrence Rafferty, "The Last Temptation of Christ," *New Yorker* 64, no. 29 (September 5, 1988): 78–79; and Christopher Sharrett, "The Last Temptation of Christ," *Cineaste* 17, no. 1 (1989): 28–29. See Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conserva-tive Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), for insights into this increasingly powerful Christian constituency.

46. Gibson edited six minutes of the most gratuitous violence for a 2005 release of the film for the home market.
47. Von Simson, *The Gothic,* xxi
48. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
49. The fourteen stations are the condemnation of Jesus by Pilate; Jesus's acceptance of the cross; his first fall; the encounter with his mother Mary; Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus; Vernonica wiping Jesus's face; his second fall; the encounter with the women of Jerusalem; his third fall; Jesus being stripped of his garments; the crucifixion; Jesus's death; Jesus's removal from the cross; and the burial of Jesus.
50. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 51.
51. Ibid., 14.
52. Von Simson, *The Gothic,* xxi.
53. Ibid., 54.
54. Ibid., xix.
55. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 12.
56. Ibid., 79.
57. Ibid.
58. Jeff Simon, "Gibson's Gospel: A Religious Zealot's 'The Passion of the Christ' is not Sacred, Just Sadistic," *Buffalo News*, February 25, 2004, D1.
59. Ty Burr, "The Passion of the Christ," *The Boston Globe,* February 24, 2004, D1.
60. Ken Hillis, in *Digital Sensations,* makes a connection between a medieval understanding of emblems and the "contemporary implosion of image, reality, and discourse" in simulated, virtual technologies. Hillis, *Digital Sensations: Space, Identity, and Embodiment in Virtual Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 67.
61. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 72.
62. Frank Kendon, *Mural Paintings in English Churches during the Middle Ages: An Introductory Essay on the Folk Influence in Religious Art* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, 1923), 118–19.
63. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art,* Vol. 2, trans. Janet Seligman (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 10; Hahn, "Vision Dei," 182.
64. Schiller, *Iconography,* 52, 11.
65. Ibid.
66. Kendon, *Mural Paintings,* 88.
67. Camille, "Before the Gaze," 214.
68. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 1.
69. Simon, "Gibson's Gospel," D1.
70. Jonathan Romney, "Pulp Crucifixion: Medieval Horror on a Biblical Scale," *Independent on Sunday* (London), March 28, 2004, 16–17.
71. Steinfels, "Beliefs," 13.

72. Andree Seu, "After the Movie," *World Magazine* 19, no. 11 (March 20, 2004).
73. Steinfels, "Beliefs," 13; John Hartl cited in Anon, "'Passion of the Christ' Creates Passionate Divide," *The Houston Chronicle,* February 25, 2004, 8.
74. C.W. Nevius and Joshunda Sanders, "The Passion of the Christ," *The San Francisco Chronicle,* February 26, 2004, A13.
75. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art,* 66–68.
76. Peter Conrad, "The Art of Pain," *The Observer* (London), April 4, 2004, 6.
77. The rise of Passion plays in twelfth century Europe—religious dramatizations drawn from the Gospels that played a prominent role in furthering anti-Semitism—sculptural stations of the cross, and the development of certain groups of devotional images, including the veneration of Passion relics, would all contribute to what Schiller sees as an important tension that emerged throughout this period, between, on the one hand, a desire to enlarge the image of the crucifixion image by including related popular scenes, and, on the other, to remain faithful to the devotional image and represent Jesus in "gestures of ostentation" such as the Virgin and Child, the Man of Sorrows, and the Crucifixion. Schiller, *Iconography,* 76; Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 63.
78. Miles, "The Art of *The Passion,*" in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 18. Other references Miles identifies include Georges de la Tour during candlelit interiors, Rembrandt's famous head of Christ during the Last Supper, and Bellini's Pietà in the cut and color of Mary's veils (ibid.).
79. Mel Gibson, "Forwards," *The Passion Book: Photography from the Movie* The Passion of the Christ (Los Angeles: Icon Distribution, Inc., 2004).
80. Jody Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 13.
81. Ibid.
82. Siegfried Wenzel, "'*Somer Game*' and Sermon Reference to a Corpus Christi Play," *Modern Philology* 86 (1988–1989): 274–83; in Olson, "Plays as Play," 213.
83. Arnoul Gréban, *The Mystery of the Passion: The Third Day,* trans. Paula Guiliano (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1996).
84. Clifford Davidson, "Introduction," *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge,* Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 19 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 1. For an insightful interpretation of the *Miraclis,* see Erick Kelemen, "Drama in Sermons: Quotation, Performativity, and Conversion in a Middle English Sermon on the Prodigal Son and in *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge,*" *A Journal of English Literary History* 69 (2002): 1–19. Kelemen makes a compelling argument about the anxiety surrounding mimesis and conversion in the *Tretise* using semiotics to make his point: "the mimetic performance of God's word strays too far from the word and causes the audience to be caught up in the spatial lure of dramatic activity and spectacle, caught up in the world of the signifier and missing entirely the world of the signified" (16).
85. Garrett P. Epp, "Ecce Homo," in *Queering the Middle Ages,* ed. Glen Berger and Steven F. Kruger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 237–38.
86. Anon, "The *Passion of the Christ* at Easter," *Sydney Morning Herald,* April 9, 2004, 28; Steinfels, "Beliefs," 13.
87. Enders, *The Medieval Theater,* 6.
88. Ibid., 193.
89. Darwin Smith, "The Role of Christ in Medieval French Passions. What Can We Know?" (Doctoral Program in Theater Studies lecture given at the CUNY Graduate Center, October 14, 2004).
90. Jody Enders, "Seeing is Not Believing," in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 187. Despite wearing both full-body and facial prostheses, Jim Caviezel sustained injuries while the film was in production.
91. Ibid., 190.

92. Philippe de Vigneulles cited in Heinrich Michelant's edition of the *gedenkbuch des Metzer Bürgers Philippe von Vigneulles*, 244–45, quoted and translated in Enders, *The Medieval Theater,* 194–95.

93. Ibid., 197, 201.

94. See Camille's discussion of *imitation Christi* in relation to nuns being surrounded by images, *Gothic Art,* 24.

95. For more on the representation of the Passion narrative in the early cinema period, see Roland Cosandey, Andre Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning, eds., *An Invention of the Devil* (Sainte-foy: les Presses de l'universite Laval; Lausanne: Editions Payot, 1993).

96. Epp, "Ecco Homo," 241.

97. Ibid.

98. This factoid appeared in William G. Little's essay "Jesus's Extreme Makeover," in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 176.

99. David Reinhard, "What I Saw at 'The Passion of the Christ'" *The Oregonian,* February 29, 2004, E04.

100. Tom Heinen, "'Who Do You Say That I Am?'; 'The Passion of the Christ' Could Shape our Image of Jesus for Decades," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 24, 2004, 01A. Emphasis added.

101. Karen Jo Torjesen, "The Journey of the Passion Play from Medieval Piety to Contemporary Spirituality," in *After the Passion is Gone: American Religious Consequences,* ed. J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 94, 97.

102. Liz Szabo, "*Passion of Christ* Moves Film's Early Viewers," *USA Today,* February 18, 2004, 1D.

103. Susannah Heschel, "Christ's Passion: Homoeroticism and the Origins of Christianity," in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 107.

104. Olson, "Plays as Play," 213.

105. According to Mark D. Jordan and Kent L. Brintnall, "gesture, facial expression, costumes, hair styles, décor, even color temperature are registered [by Emmerich] with precision and exactitude," in "Mel Gibson, Bride of Christ," in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible*, 82.

106. Enders, "Seeing Is Not Believing," in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 189.

107. Ibid., 191.

108. William G. Little, "Jesus's Extreme Makeover," in Beale and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 174.

109. Jordan and Brintnall, "Mel Gibson," 82.

110. John Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with National Gallery Publications Ltd., 1999), 35.

111. This observation was made by Pamela Sheingorn in a lecture on theatrical stagings of the Passion as part of her "Medieval Performance" class at the CUNY Graduate Center, March 13, 2006.

112. David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 220.

113. R. N. Swanson, "Passion and Practice: The Social and Ecclesiastical Implications of Passion Devotion in the Late Middle Ages," in *The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late Medieval Culture,* ed. A. A. MacDonald, H. N. B. Ridderbos, and R. M. Schlusemann (Groningen: Ebgert Forste, 1996), 6.

114. Ibid., 6, 8.

115. For more on her performance, see Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth of Spalbeck's Trance Dance of Faith: A Performance Theory Interpretation from Anthropological and Art Historical Perspectives," in Suydam and Ziegler, *Performance,* 299–355.

116. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 64.
117. Ibid., 65.
118. Ibid.
119. *Cyclorama of Jerusalem*: *The Unforgettable Moment* brochure, 2.
120. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 33.
121. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 104.
122. Swanson, "Passion," 11.
123. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Penguin/ Arkana, 1994), 65, 68.
124. Martin, *Art and the Religious Experience,* 235.
125. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 66.
126. Davidson, "Introduction," 96, cited in Epp, "Ecce Homo," 245.
127. Camille, *Gothic Art,* 155.
128. Joe Williams, "'The Passion of the Christ': Gibson's Film is Overkill on Jesus' Death Not Life," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* February 25, 2004, E1. Jack Miles, "The Art of The Passion," in Beal and Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible,* 14.
129. Morgan, *Visual Piety,* 9.