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The Passion of the Digital: the Ontology of the Photographic Image in the Age of New Media

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

Le film *La Passion du Christ* de Mel Gibson, phénomène culturel de l'année 2004 sert de point de départ à cet article. À partir de ce film, nous examinons l'héritage que laisse le XXe siècle en ce qui concerne le conflit des réalismes, l'impératif graphique des cultures de l'image numérique contemporaine et des dilemmes ontologiques impliquant la technologie et les médias de masse. *La Passion* est un 'événement' filmique onto-théologique qui découle autant d'une religiosité toute-puissante que d'un processus cultuel d'extase lié à certaines valeurs rituelles propre à un technologisme "Nouvel Âge" du son et de l'image. Cette écriture endographique du récit évangélique qui affecte le spectateur de manière viscérale affirme une vérité transcendantale déjà présente dans un cosmos de croyances qui dès lors se substitue à une représentation 'réaliste' et 'extériorisée' du monde, laquelle ne conduirait qu'à contester la Foi. Or, la condition de possibilité de cette écriture tient au fait que la croyance inconditionnelle dans le Christ et dans son sacrifice s'associe à une technologie (le numérique) affranchie de tout scepticisme à caractère scientifique.

The Passion of the Digital : the Ontology of the Photographic Image in the Age of New Media

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Introduction

Mel Gibson's controversial 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* was an unprecedented box office success in the course of its theatrical release, grossing over 600 million dollars worldwide[1]. The film, made in two dead languages (Aramaic and Latin) along with Hebrew, remains, by far, the highest earning independently produced subtitled film in the United States. It was protested by various Jewish groups on grounds of anti-Semitism, and passionately defended by the same conservative Christian forces that were once up in arms against Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)[2]. In the years following the film's release, commentators and scholars within the academy as well as outside it have written about *The Passion*'s anti-Jewish sentiments and how it narrates the story of Crucifixion through a selective reading of the Gospels[3].

It is however not my purpose here to delve into questions about authenticity and the concomitant politics of representation – that is, concerns related to the "textuality" of The Bible, the variegated terrain of Christian theology, anti-Semitism, and the Jesus industry in the cultural history of the United States. Instead, I will embark on some theoretical speculations about cinematic realism and the graphic image in the era of New Media. The questions about realism here are posed in a general sense; they pertain to an overall aesthetic-ideological specter (rather than a positively definable, singular theme) that has haunted theoretical debates throughout the 20th century. I will invoke some select theorems in this discursive terrain which pertain to an industrial/commonsensical

mode of realism affiliated with an increasingly global American popular culture, as well as to theories of film realism and counter realist impulses inspired by Marxist phenomenology and Kantian humanism. I intend to draw out some such historical signatures of realism and brush them against issues brought up in mainstream evaluations of Gibson's film, especially its phatic qualities that apparently coalesce into a transcendental experience for the devout. In other words, I begin with a basic question : what exactly is the critical relationship between the tactile and compelling techno-graphic dimensions of *The Passion of the Christ* and the 'contest for the real' that is the legacy of long-standing theoretical meditations on cinema in the course of the 20th century?

I will go on to argue that *Passion* is an onto-theological filmic 'eventing' that derives as much from an almighty religiosity as it does from a cultish process of being enraptured by certain ritual values of new-age technologism in the cinematic production of sounds and images. The event, as such, is a psychosomatic phenomenon created at the level of the committed devout viewers' bodily tissues and nerves. This rapture, as clear and present 'Passion', tends to abstract and dissolve the apparent distance between the spectral body of Christ and the real body of the (movie) acolyte. The immanence of daily life is thereby seen to meet, or be virtually 'touched' by the transcendence of the icon. This tactile impress of the film does not presume the skeptical modern subject envisioned by most political theories of realism or even by their market-friendly counterparts. As we shall see, the film seeks a cultish audience, an interiorization of affects of a particular kind. *The Passion*, however, can provide us with the opportunity to transcode and revisit certain "classical" questions concerning the ontology of the moving image of which we are now the grey-haired legatees.

Defenders of Gibson's film frequently described its viewing as a life transforming event. Part of the emphasis here is on its veracity in a simple sense. *The Passion of the Christ*, compared to previous Hollywood Biblical epics – from De Mille's 1927, *The King of Kings* to Nicholas Ray's 1961 film of the same name or George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – was referred to as "the least epic of all epic movies"[4] because the film apparently, and with true Christian humility, shuns all spectacular, ceremonial, and painterly artifice. Instead, the film accords many viewers the raw feeling of "being there", right at the "foot of the cross".[5] For some of them the experience of the film was like a pilgrimage, attracting even spectators who had not set foot in a movie theater in years. Many evangelical church congregations block-booked seats for Sunday screenings and invited their clergy to worship in front of a celluloid altar, perhaps giving a whole new meaning to the sacrament of the Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation.

The phenomenological claim of humble immanence and lack of Hollywood artifice has of course been heartily challenged by several critics

in the mainstream press. As a matter of fact the epithets they hurled at Gibson's magnum opus – the terms of reference they invoked – are usually reserved for pop-cultural items. One reviewer, *Slate* magazine's David Edelstein called it *The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre*. According to him the film was a two hours and six minute long snuff movie (2004). *Boston Globe*'s James Carroll simply stated that the film was "obscene"; that it incited hatred of Jews and was an "icon of religious violence" (2004). Peter Travers, writing in *Rolling Stone*, opined that the film seemed like "the greatest story ever told by the Marquis de Sade." Commenting on the uneven style of the film – which, according to him, shifted incessantly from the "powerfully moving" to "the fanatically obtuse" – Travers derided "cheapening" features like "tricked up sequences" and motifs derived from the horror genre like "an androgynousatan with Gollum-like spawn." The idea of a meek, ground-level realism of an all-too-human witnessing is also challenged by Travers when he invokes one of the many efforts toward soaring verticalization : "a tear from God the Father that falls from heaven like the bomb from Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor*" and the Temple of Jerusalem is destroyed (2004).

Other commentators picked on the influences of the Hollywood action genre and the slasher film on Gibson's shooting style (the fight sequence in the Garden of Gethsemane between the apostles and the soldiers, for instance, in which Peter cuts off Melchus' ear). They also located *Passion* in a lineage of screen masochism and violence that ties it with the filmmaker's earlier, Oscar winning, *Braveheart* (1995). A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* noted similarities with shock cinema in line with Quentin Tarantino and Gaspar Noé, in the sequences featuring a slithery, "effeminate" Satan that looks like a Wes Craven nightmare, while complaining about the "high-toned creep show of menacing orchestral undertones and spine-jabbing choral effects" in John Debney's score (2004).

Many of these condemnations however shared a broad common ground that includes purely ethical humanist positions as well as perspectives from a temperate Christian faith. The latter stance of moderate piety, it is assumed, would qualify as civic religion precisely because it is devoid of the fundamentalist and intolerant impulses that purportedly drive Gibson and his supporters. Peter Travers' chief grievance about the graphic violence for example has a distinctly spiritual source. He says that Gibson acted in a manner contrary to Christ's message by filming the New Testament Gospels with the unforgiving fire and brimstone tenacity of the Old. A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* similarly finds the film to be "utterly lacking in grace," and a feast of "terror, fury, and gore" bereft of any redemptive spirit.

On the other hand, perhaps the most indicative and in some sense poignant mainstream defense of the film came from the late Roger Ebert, widely considered to be the most influential American film critic in the

last few decades. Let us earmark a few significant matters in his review.

Ebert categorically declared *The Passion of the Christ* to be the most violent film that he had ever seen (2004). He was candid in saying that he was moved by the "depth of feeling" of the film and, unlike the reviewers cited above, wholesomely touched by the *technical virtuosity* of the production. The film appealed to the altar-boy of his younger days, when he was told to meditate on Christ's suffering. However, Church rituals or the chanting of the priests, by Ebert's own admission, were never powerful enough to affect a spiritual experience in him. Gibson's film, on the other hand, accorded him, for the first time in his life, "a visceral idea" of what the Passion meant. The exacting, uncompromising nature of the visceral is theologically important for Ebert; the architectonics of narration and quibbles about Biblical textuality, the few "passing references to the teachings of Christ", and indeed the troubling question of anti-Semitism itself get relegated to secondary positions in comparison. The film is a "personal message" movie of a most "radical kind" and not a "sermon or homily" which can be analyzed in regular discursive terms. It is, instead, a tendentiously subcutaneous staging that seeks to conjure up and extend the passion play of sensations to the core of being, where the distinction between the agony and the ecstasy – between the toleration of the mortal body and the transformation of the soul by grace – becomes, in the last exacting instance, central to the question of spiritual commitment and, indistinguishably, the commitment to the film itself. For Ebert, therefore, the film is the eternal return of "the Central event of the Christian religion. Take it or leave it".

It is here that Ebert states that unlike the "pious" Hollywood epics of the fifties – which were like Holy pictures come to life, featuring Christ and the Apostles resembling "neat, clean, well-barbered middle class businessmen" – Gibson's earthy, unkempt, and mercilessly brutalized Jesus is not a sight for all beholders. Ebert tends to indicate that in contrast to a cosmopolitan global audience that enjoyed the spectacles of yore, *Passion* is essentially for a Christian flock, but of particular kind. The film does not seek to proselytize among unbelievers or reclaim the apostate; in its acute demands for affective engagement with a realm in which pain and revulsion are supposed to pass onto the spiritual and the ecstatic, it seeks a viewer with an already instilled internal universe of belief. Ebert notes that it is exactly here that the film loses a significant chunk of spectators belonging to Christian denominations (it is quite clear that he cannot find a plausible reason why atheists or people following other religions should even consider watching the film). He cites the case of David Ansen, a critic he regards highly, who felt "abused" in the course of his viewing instead of being "moved by Christ's suffering or awed by his sacrifice". Ebert calls Ansen's response completely valid and readily acknowledges the fact that he speaks for many people who might "enter the theater in a devout or spiritual mood and emerge deeply disturbed... Some may leave before the end".

It could be reductive to describe a core Christian community devoted to the film in *positive* ethnographic or denominational terms, although such attempts have been made[6]. They often center upon the authorial figure of Mel Gibson himself. Thanks to the frequent meltdowns and public anti-Semitic rants of this washed-up Hollywood megastar, his ultraconservative politics and traditionalist Catholic upbringing, which supposedly includes a denial of the authenticity of the Church after the Second Vatican Counsel (1962-1965), are well known. It is also a common allegation that his father Hutton Gibson is a Holocaust denier. Writing about *The Passion of the Christ* in the Christian portal "Spirituality and Practice : Resources for Spiritual Journeys," Fredric and Mary Ann Brussat make a gesture in the direction of earmarking a Gibsonite flock in that spirit :

> Theologians call this understanding of Jesus' death and mission "atonement theology". It is not the only way that Christians understand the cross... but it is the one Gibson obviously believes. It is the reason why Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals have embraced the film so enthusiastically, even distributing a brochure with the provocative statement "Dying was his reason for living" (2004).

There is thus the notion of an interiorized Christian cult here in lieu of a general brotherhood (I use the masculine collective term advisedly). Membership to this group requires more than an unquestioning belief in Christ's overall message, it requires a will to invest body and soul into a techno-cinematic ritual of the Passion, with the fearful transfer between torment and redemption that it entails. I call on the term 'ritual' in a spirit of comparativist anthropology, drawing from Romila Thapar's readings of Indic/Hindu religiosity : "where [the ritual] is meticulously observed, it suspends [its] performers [...] into a threshold condition where only the parameters of their time-reckoning prevail" (1996 : 10)[7]. This, once again, does not indicate a coarse psychologism of infantile regression by which the acolyte-viewer would actually imagine himself transported back in time to the foot of the cross. Rather, the ritual has to do with a phenomenal thickening of time, by which the messianic powers of the past curve into the otherwise empty and calendrical present, abolishing and absolving it at once. The Passion thereby becomes eternal not because it is being miraculously watched exactly as it happened, but because it can be perpetually renewed in a state of active communion with the spectral body of Christ that the film *facilitates*.[8]

The above plainly explains why simply being a Christian in the general sense of the term isn't sufficient to truly partake in the Passion, for the latter requires a specific, uncompromising interiorization of the techno-phatic experience. Unlike David Ansen, the subject must be ready to 'resurrect', with wholly committed body and soul, the promise as well *as the emphatic bodily pain* of the original event. Subjectivity here is not conceived in an organicist, unitary sense pertaining to the modern idea of the integrated, cognizing and volunteering individual.

Rather, it is an imputed *diagram* of affections and faith called into being by ritualistic cinema itself – the virtual reader or subject that the film demands. Real individuals, with their myriad thresholds of endurance, with their different psychosomatic terminals, with their willful or unconscious attractions toward or recoils from events of sensation, may be absorbed, fatigued or repelled by the overall virtual sphere of communion. What is paramount for the film's devotees is its power, as a techno-theological artifice in the age of mass production of the senses and industrial temporalization of consciousness[9], to instigate a visceral realization of the momentous, a rediscovery of an amniotic relationship of the perceiving and memorializing self with the font of being.

I will return to themes of the technologistic ritual, Christian interiority, and virtual communion later in the essay. For the moment, let us turn to the question of realism and the uncompromising intensity of affects in *The Passion*. For obvious reasons related to the nature of the film, the question of violence will be paramount here. Let us make a note of a few ancillary matters to initiate this line of query. Gibson himself reiterated endlessly that his objective was to depict the Crucifixion as realistically as possible by following the synoptic Gospels. This assertion, however, comes with an ontological caveat : even at the level of detailed blood and gore, the depicted *Passion* on screen necessarily must fall short of the (historical) real event, which, according to Gibson, must have been even more violent[10]. Secondly, a milder, less bloody version of *The Passion of the Christ* was released in 2005. It was a box office flop (Griffiths 2007 : 36)[11] even though it was expected that this cut would appeal to a wider audience. Finally, what interests me is a tacit general proposition shared by many of *The Passion*'s critics – that there is a strong pre-modern character to Gibson's 'techno-realism' – a formal apparatus of high cinematic veracity devoted to an ultra-conservative medieval imagination[12]. As Jonathan Romney puts it, "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" (cited in Griffiths 2007 : 20).

The question of faith and representation here also resonates with the famous observation about modern and medieval art made by André Bazin in his essay on the ontology of the photographic image. Modern art, according to Bazin, in trying to "give significant expression to the world both concretely and in essence" is perpetually caught between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity. Perspective thus was the original sin of Western painting; it created a pathway for journeys through the void of modernity. As such, modern art is unable to "bear away our faith". However, medieval art never had this crisis. It was, according to Bazin, at once vividly *realistic* and spiritual (1967 : 12). The question here is whether the term 'realism' needs to be located in a specific 'medieval' *épistémè*, in that 'happy age' when the starry sky was the map of all possible paths[13]. That is, must we also add that this immanent 'real-

ism' is not universal, but something that is lost forever with the modern twilight of the idols and an irreparable split between the world of the subject and that of the object?

The *Figura* and the Ontology of Christian Realism

In the second chapter of *Mimesis* , his monumental study of representation and realism in Western romance literature, Erich Auerbach speaks about a historical flux replacing a sense of fate at a crucial juncture, which had a "most decisive bearing upon man's conception of the tragic and the sublime" (*Ibid.* : 41). Auerbach begins by demonstrating that the literature of antiquity (as illustrated in the writings of Tacitus for instance) could be realistic only in the 'low style', covering comic or vulgar episodes. He counterpoises this ethical and rhetorical mode of historical enunciation with a famous passage from the Passion episode in the Gospel of Saint Mark, in which Peter the Apostle fulfills his Master's providential saying by denying Christ three times. Auerbach notes that neither in Mark nor in any of the other Gospels does it become clear how exactly Peter manages to extricate himself from the suspicious crowd. In the immanent style of the Gospels, only matters relevant to Christ's presence and mission on earth are important and therefore determine all anaphoric relations between nouns and verbs. That is exactly why Peter's exit needs no explanation.

Auerbach notes that seen from the commanding heights of the mighty Roman Empire, this is a mere provincial incident involving a poor and humble fisherman from Galilee (*Ibid.* : 39-42). In the text of Mark, it is presented as a brief, direct dialogue instead of the dramatic explications and gravitas of utterance that are normative in Tacitus. However, in the wake of Christ's Passion, the denial of Peter becomes a paradigmatic instance of a doubting, powerless, and timid humanity waking to a new conception of the tragic and the sublime. This picture of the humble everyday – featuring apparently insignificant persons and their small hopes and fears – passes onto the momentous. In contrast with the literary forms of antiquity, realism can no longer be confined to the idyllic or the bawdy. Peter's denial, according to Auerbach, is therefore the story of a great 'pendulation' in the heart of one lowly individual that achieves resonance across the world and across the ages (*Ibid.* : 42-45).

The figure of Peter is not draped in the robes of greatness. His speech is coarse, his birth is of humble stock, and his fortune does not provide him with powers of epic transformations. Yet his all-too-human act of weakness is imbued with a profoundly tragic aspect precisely because his apparently meek, inconsequential *figure* now basks in a strange luminosity under a transformed sky of meaning. It is a horizon of meaningfulness already inaugurated by Christ's life and mission in the world. The figuration of the Apostle and the Saint in the earthy,

fallible being of the poor fisherman (who himself is the disciple of a poor carpenter mocked, spat upon, tortured, and killed) therefore takes place at that extraordinary junction between the immanent everyday and the transcendence of the heavens. This is exactly why, in Auerbach's understanding, this episode in the Gospels falls within an hour of transformation in Western representational traditions, in which the realism of diurnal life acquires a nobility and seriousness of purpose.

The sight of Christ being tormented, insulted, and crucified dominates consciousness by giving birth to a new elevated style "which is ready to absorb the sensorily realistic, even the ugly, the undignified and the physically base" (Auerbach 2003 : 72). This new realism is a *sermo humilis* in which matters are to be placed in an exegetic context that removes the thing told far from its sensuous grounding (*Ibid.*). The thing *really* being told – pertaining not to the brutality inflicted by the powerful on an apparently poor carpenter but to a cosmic point-of-view understanding of the earthly task of God's own son – is what Auerbach calls the *Figural* meaning. The sensuous base – that which is merely phenomenal in human terms – always pales in front of such import. The task of tangible representation in this world therefore is to turn attention away from the here and now, toward otherworldly significance. Yet, unlike the case of antiquity, the sensuous is not just decadence, for it is tinged with the ardor of the profound human struggle it represents (*Ibid.* : 70).

When it comes to occasioning the recall of a founding memory, Christian art and representation thus have a dual function. They have to present a sensuous base that is affiliated with, yet necessarily distinguished from the *Figura*. From this point of view, when it comes to film, it would, for instance, be idolatrous to presume that either the actor Jeffrey Hunter playing Christ in the 1961 *King of Kings* (who, as Ebert points out, was forced to shave his armpits by the preview audience) or the bloody, brown, and unwashed James Caviezel himself in Gibson's film have any positive resemblance to the face of faces. Yet, what the sensuous base (the acting/performance aspect, the *mise-en-scène*, or the architecture of sound) must accomplish is the setting up of an ontological bridge between the core of being and the perpetually renewed promise of the originary event. As Auerbach explains later in his book while discussing the 12th century Christmas play *Mystère d'Adam*, God Himself is addressed in such representational traditions as *Figura Salvatoris* : "The term can be interpreted as referring simply to the Priest who was to act – that is to say, to be the figure for – the part (of God) and whom one hesitated to call Deus as one called other actors Adam, Eve…" (*Ibid.* : 156). This, therefore, would be a potential duality from the modern perspective : the task of figuration demanded that Christ's face had to be at once human and transcendental.

The sensuous only has to point toward the Figural. The Figural in

turn absolves the sensuous by abolishing its merely phenomenal status. The Figural is therefore not identical to the realistic although it is in a relationship of immanence to the latter. It absolves the here and now by placing mundane objects and bodies in an exegetical context where *all* things great and small are claimed by the driving power of Christian providence. *Everything* that we see (*this* body of Christ, *that* crown of thorns, *that* Roman whip) is claimed by this onto-theological force. What the Figural does not claim we never get to see within the parameters of this mode of representation, as in the way Peter delivers himself from the hostile crowd.

Time in Figural representation is charged with proleptic power : the Old Testament figures who come before Christ; the birth of Eve, humankind's mother of the flesh from Adam's rib; the birth of the Church when a Roman soldier pierces Christ's side on the cross. Such events are not linked in temporal or causal ways, but connected vertically to an unfolding, singularly divine providence that ripples across the orders of time. Auerbach explains that in *figuram implere*, the first event or personage signifies not just itself but also the second, while the second fulfills the first (*Ibid.* : 73-74). It is in this sense that Christianity is Christ's promised bride and Christ its bridegroom who will return. Auerbach illustrates this by citing the moment when a Roman soldier pierces Jesus' side as he hangs from the cross and blood and water flows out :

> [...] when these two occurrences are exegetically interrelated in the doctrine that Adam's sleep is a figure of Christ's death-sleep; that, as from the wound in Adam's side mankind's primordial mother after the flesh, Eve, was born, so from the wound in Christ's side was born the mother of all men after the spirit, the Church (blood and water are sacramental symbols) – then the sensory pales before the power of figural meaning (*Ibid.* : 48-49).

We see a glimpse of such a proleptic time consciousness in the anterior workings of Gibson's film. It has been widely reported that the director played a cameo in *The Passion* as the faceless Roman soldier whose hands drive the nail into the hand of Christ. As the story goes, he did so because he was driven by a proleptic temporal consciousness and guilt, as it was his sins that put the Savior up on the Cross[14]. The immanent presence of Christ's Passion cuts across the ages and can therefore fulfill both, that which comes before it as well that which follows it in a merely human metrical order of temporality. Gibson's sins keep putting Christ back on the cross and Christ, through his mercy and suffering, keeps absolving him.[15]

Later in Mimesis Auerbach demonstrates how Dante's work, in making the Christian-figural Being a reality in the fullest sense, destroys the mold in the very act of realizing it, since it is the image of man here that eclipses the image of God (*Ibid.* : 174-202)[16]. It is from this moment onward that, in a proper sense, the templates of realism in the western context acquire qualities of disenchantment, errancies of the

vernacular, and merge into the variegated historical flows of secular humanism. In this new world picture, the profane, or at least a good part of it, detaches itself from the ineluctable promise of providential grace and acquires its own irreverent expressive powers and indeed its own coda of becoming. The profane therefore, in the age of weakened providence, can only be held in sinful *perspective*; it becomes adrift in a world whose meaningfulness and image is perpetually torn between the poles of the subjective and the objective.

We can immediately identify some nodal features of a complex ontological transformation : the displacement of Christian providence by, say, a Hegelian teleological philosophy of World History and human centered, dynastic progress; the supplanting of the acolyte by the citizen; the brotherhood of sons by a fraternal civil society; the Papal Church by the rational state; and indeed the millennial promise of divinity itself by the destining narrative of the Nation. This historical field of transformations has a wide armature and it is not possible to earmark in our discussion its numerous folds, terrains, breakaways and conflicting attributes. However, what is important is that the new realism of the modern, in its most memorable instances, continues to absolve the small story and the insignificant figure by connecting it with grander narratives. Forms of historical reckoning – both idealist and material – are marshaled to make such linkages between the particular and the universal, the citizen and the state, the individual *bildung* and the story of the motherland or the revolution. The spiritual questions pertaining to the Biblical form of *parataxis* (see Auerbach, *Mimesis* : 71) or the dramatization of the inner event – the sea changes in converted souls – can be said to be transposed into those of psychobiography and concomitant hermeneutics of the subject like psychoanalysis.

A very important caveat and reminder is necessary at this point. The broad epistemological shift rather violently compressed and outlined above does not indicate that the Figural actually survives in a secular guise in the modern age. That is because the Figural shows both the figure and its fulfillment, in contrast to the allegorical or the symbolic which do not accomplish the same, since they presume a subject-object split. The *figure* of the modern therefore wavers between the disenchantment with and the historical promise of secular becoming. It is claimed by a spirit of progress, but is blessed with weak messianic power and is therefore never quite fulfilled. Its *bildung*, like the perpetually gestating nation itself, never achieves the exemplary completion that the Figural demands. The modern figure is a protagonist marked by human finitudes in a perpetually novelizing world, not an absolute incarnation in a prophetic lineage. It is exactly here that *The Passion of the Christ* departs from the modern. It does not limit cinema to the normative tasks of emblematic, symbolic, or allegorical representation – the historical or Gnostic Christ (Scorsese's *The Last Temptation*), the politically 'resacralized' Jesus (Pasolini's 1964 *Il vangelo secondo Matteo*) or the ceremonial or

iconic Man on the Cross in Technicolor (Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*). Instead, Gibson's film mobilizes a technological apparatus of affective, augmented sights and sounds to create a prodigious sensuous base that attempts to invoke the Passion as Figural presence. An important feature of this ritualistic invocation is the matter of inescapable durational intensity, covering almost one hundred minutes of screen time.

Let us return to the film at this point.

The Sensuous Base of *The Passion of the Christ*

There can be many kinds of objections to *The Passion*'s visceral, uncompromising violence from moderns who are committed to various forms of realisms. My purpose here is not to provide a singular definition of realism and collide the visceral aspect of *Passion* against it. Rather it is to earmark certain pivotal tropes in an overall horizon of many realisms and to critically examine the film in relation to them. First of all, in terms of a broader epistemological horizon of the realist taken in a secular sense, *Passion* fails the test of disenchantment. The camera in Gibson's film opens up to a pro-filmic space *without* mobilizing any form of Cartesian doubt. From the moment it begins – shorn of any titles, without any formal announcement of its human origin – Gibson's film is designed to approximate the idea of an imminent revelation. It does not seek to produce a world-picture devoid of miracles, nor does it attempt to frame the mythic or the supernatural within a decorative, culturalist, historico-anthropological, or symbolic grid of reckoning, like the fabulous tales we witness in de Sica's *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) or Rossellini's *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (1952). *The Passion of the Christ* departs from the general discursive domain of realism in Western representational traditions since the late 19th century with all its myriad scientific, sociological, ethnographic, constructivist, or even positivistic variants. As we know, the ideological underpinnings of these numerous positions cover a wide spectrum and loud indeed was the clamor of subjectivities surrounding them. However, in an overall dispensation of humanism – when, in the wake of Marx, Freud, Darwin, and Lord Kelvin all idols were in twilight – that which called itself realist had to, in the first instance, acknowledge a world that was radically desacralized.

Secondly, from the perspective of a Kantian-Hegelian aesthetic humanism qua André Bazin for instance, the graphic depiction of torture in the film, precisely due to its raw nature, would *not* qualify as realism. As we know, Bazin makes this famous distinction between the erotic and the pornographic in his review of Lo Duca's 1956 book *Erotisme au cinéma* (Bazin 1971b). He says that direct representation of orgasm as well as death in cinema would be pornographic precisely because in either case a graphic presentation would be an ontological obscenity. Cinema, in a truly modern sense, can therefore speak about everything, but not show everything. That is because if cinema, as Lo Duca says,

represents dream in relation to desire and we long to see on screen what we cannot in actual life, then a perverse, limitless and gross presentation of actuality would extinguish that which can be called desire as opposed to that which is merely appetite. This wistful or pious longing is important for Bazin, since it attaches desire to the imagination in a temporal plane by perpetually deferring the coveted object and refraining from making that object literal or spectacular through a violent act of phenomenological *reduction*. Instead, realist cinema, in the true sense of the modern, should call attention to everything germane in a manner that allows scope for subjective contemplation and judgment. In the interests of freedom, it should not enthrall the subject in a primal plane of the instinctive or the sensory. Thus, for Bazin a boundless depiction of sex or death on screen would be the modern equivalent of the public executions in the Place de Grève or the Roman gladiatorial contests in the circus, which were no different from orgies. The obscenity of newsreel images showing officers of Chiang Kai-shek's army executing "communist spies" in the streets of Shanghai is therefore, in an ontological sense, akin to that of a pornographic film, with death becoming the "negative equivalent of sexual pleasure" (1971b : 173).

The third possible objection is a bit more complicated. It pertains to the matter of realism in a technical or formal sense and to *The Passion of the Christ* being a cinematic work that comes into being in an age marked by the demise of analog cinema. We need to start by recognizing that, for the most part, Western classical film theory made the indexical quality of cinema the centerpiece of many of its concerns with the medium. Indexicality, it was assumed, predisposed filmic technology toward a basic empirico-phenomenological realism which could then either be critically experimented upon or transformed into massifed patterns of habits and feelings. The implication being that templates of observational realism could in turn be declared to be either naïve or bourgeois (the world as it is) by more radical aspirations toward a diagnostic or critical realism (the world as it should be, or actually is, behind the veneer of idealism and false consciousness)[17]. As we know, this spectrum of complex, variegated wills to realism and the manifold aesthetic-political encounters with such wills ranged from Soviet Montage to the Hollywood culture industry in the West, curving around debates about the luminosity of German expressionism, French poetic realism, subsequent Left Bank traditions, Italian neo-realism and other assertions of the old, the transitional, the status-quoist, and the new. In the global South, the question of an ontological connection between the irresistible indexical nature of film, Empire, Capital, and truth of the world resonated with equal ferocity and variations – from what was discerned to be the epic-melodramatic 'not yet real' and therefore 'not-yet cinema' of the Indian popular traditions (see Prasad 1998 : 1-26), to Espinosa's radical, anti-imperial idea of 'Imperfectness' (see Espinosa 1979) and many such quests for a Brechtian popular cinema of struggle.

Without denying the richness of these theorizations and indeed the critical differences between them, most of these artistic and theoretical positions begin by laying down a baseline of authenticity – that of an organic imprint of the light of the world on the celluloid base, carried out by a camera that supposedly does not lie. This notion of an essential association with an authentic, tangible past echoes repeatedly in the works of theorists from Kracauer to Barthes and beyond. And in Bazin's meditations on photography (and film, through critical extensions), this primary mechanical process of embalming time, "in which man plays no part", has more power to "bear away our faith" than does painting (Bazin 1967a : 12). Or else we could consider André Gaudreault's assertion that unlike literature, fiction film is "necessarily compelled to give an account of some sort of reality – the one that appeared in front of the camera – even though it has been disguised in a fiction to be recorded" (1997 : 95). Of course, all sorts of subsequent artificial embellishments, painterly interventions, or technological augmentations of this basic, singular meeting between nature and celluloid are possible which can serve a wide range of ideological and artistic purposes.

This primary question of a trace of the world, of a fundamental indexical relation between the cinema and what exists independently of it[18] has been radically transformed with the protracted death of analog recording technology and the ushering in of the digital age. Bazin's work has become topical once again in recent theoretical and philosophical efforts to come to terms with the yet again altered configurations of cinematic indexicality. That is a debate I do not wish to revisit, nor is it my desire to identify a definitive origin for this fresh round of debates or to examine its continuities with other discourses from the past pertaining to the advent of panchromatic stock, color, sound, experimentations with Smell-O-Vision, 3-D, special effects, all the way to the advent of digital sound and image systems. Rather, in the light of what I have outlined so far, my efforts will be directed towards considering the status of Gibson's film and its director's claim of 'realist' depiction (one which Ebert pronounces to be 'radically' personal). In other words, the point is to understand and contextualize the film's 'visceral', 'least epic of all epics', brand of verisimilitude in the age of the digital intermediate *when signatures of acute indexicality or the realism thereof are no guarantee of a sign's existential bond with reality*.

Two things are of crucial importance here, the first one being that in the age of the digital an emphatic claim to realism of special effects is no longer of secondary, symbolic, or ceremonial status. Unlike the parting of the Red Sea in DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, for example, cinema, having merged with animation today, no longer has to inhabit a photorealistic realm in which the painterly insert is 'caught on' by viewers, distinguished and separated from 'authentic' pictures of the world by the powers of human perception. This is not to say that the synthetic realistic image is no longer uneven, but that the unevenness

is no longer caused by the fact that the artificial image is less 'realistic' than the photorealistic one. Rather, as Lev Manovich has argued in the context of a state-of-the art digital technology more than a decade ago, the animated component of the 'parting' may even be richer in terms of shades, resolution, color, depth, or relief than the pure optical analog capture of the actual Red Sea itself[19]. Even if Bazin's statement is critically accepted and it is recognized that compared to theater film always possessed a basic coda of "inalienable realism" to fulfill – so that the Invisible Man had to "wear pajamas and smoke a cigarette", – one can say that the trickery involved has now acquired a new dimension altogether.

What the digital image does by bolstering the cinema's haptic powers, its amplitude of dynamic movement, its qualities of resolution relative to the human eye, its acute precision of forms and lines and thereby its overall affective properties is, first of all, to cancel the ontology of 'tracing' of 'organic' pictures. In the age of the digital, special effects stop being *obvious* inscriptions of décor or deceit. Previously it could be assumed that it was indeed an actor who, subsequently rendered 'invisible' through filmic deception, had nonetheless left behind voluptuous traces of form and verve of movement, by the manner in which he filled out his pajamas or held his cigarette. In the new dispensation of the digital, however, once the synthetic image manages to overcome a critical threshold of phenomenological skepticism, there is no longer an existential-subjective guarantee of indexical tracing (in future Invisible Man movies there may be no actual pair of pyjamas or cigarette before the camera, nor any profilmic actor for that matter).

This, of course, does not mean that the ontological status of what is evidently miraculous, otherworldly, or futuristic undergoes a sea change as far as our exercise of reason or our scientific temperament are concerned. We do not have to believe in the worldly existence of Godzilla or that of the Brontosaurus no matter how tangible they might seem on the screen. What is of greater import, however, is that the indexical status of the everyday or the familiar (a cigarette, a pair of pajamas) doesn't offer itself to us anymore with the guaranteed worldly origin that previously marked the emblematic realism of cinema. Familiar things and bodies can therefore acquire affective powers and stochastic properties beyond the scope of the tracings of acutal presences; they can have mysterious evocative qualities whose pixilated origins are concealed to the cognitive and sensory powers of the human. That is, unlike the luminescent glass of milk in Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), which was a Gothic inscription in the *mise-en-scène* of the familiar, the digital augmentations of the known world can be *micropunctually distributed* today across the entire frame. Effects need not be focused or segmented to engage the attention of the conscious viewer and lead him to question what is seen (is it milk or is it poison?). (This is a literary allusion). They can be distributed and dispersed as fungibles of pure semiotic possibility, across the visual field in its totality, in objects great and innocuous, as well as above or below

them, on alluring surfaces as well as in sonorous depths, in intervening spaces of movement, gravitation, bounce, luminosity and darkness. The genesis of the cinematic object as well as its location – the filmic body and its habitat – therefore no longer requires the zero degree of emblematic organic photorealism as a ground; in its place we find a site of potential, non-obligatory osmosis and intricate foldings between the virtual and the real. In the age of vertical editing, fractal landscapes, architectural animation, and the Inferno Compositional Tool that allows manipulation of backgrounds and details within a frame, visual effects are now born from 'within' the very texture of analog reality and operate below the threshold of human perception (unlike the analog-era effects which were created from 'without' by techniques such as rotoscoping or optical printing).

More than the overtly spectacular or the miraculous, it is the potential for transforming the commonplace, the possibility of imbuing the diurnal with secret lusters and weightages that become important in Gibson's film and its composite 'all at once' invocation of the humble everyday, a naturalistic painterly tradition of the European Renaissance comprising of the works of Caravaggio, Mantegna, Masaccio or Piero della Francesca and the mighty tale of providence. *The Passion of the Christ* assembles, with much greater tenacity and with no visible or audible distinctions, inscriptions of a popular archaeological realism (the History Channel documentary aesthetic) with those of the mythic and the imaginative structured according to familiar Hollywood generic formats. The film can therefore populate what is necessarily flat, diagrammatic, monotonous, and iconic with the dirt, the fleshly textures, the buoyancy and motion of earthbound things. Wounds are designed to become stigmata in an ontological sense as soon as they appear, the lustily bursting forth of blood and quivering flesh becoming Eucharistic in an indelible picture of Holy Passion. The film, amongst other things, tries to do this by a special movement of cinematic time that most 'secular' feature films would find difficult or impossible to emulate. As Gibson points out in his DVD commentary, most of the scenes were filmed at the rate of 28 to 30 frames per second rather than the usual 24. The slow motion shifts in pace constantly, settling up a differential rhythm that flows, arrests, and relents only to tighten, but all within that range of frame rates.

Usually, in cinematic uses of the past, there is an abiding paradox of experiencing the bygone as unfolding presence in the calendrical flow of our humdrum time. Mary Ann Doane speaks about a "*pathos* of archival desire" (2002 : 23) that marks the cinema of the modern in her exemplary study of filmic temporalities. She points out that there is indeed a double consciousness at play here : time is susceptible to ratiocination and analysis; it is also that which 'slips away' or congeals in the imperceptible 'in-betweens' of metrical count as ephemerality, contingency or chance (see Doane 2002 : 4-23). It is this temporal consciousness of

the modern that is overwritten by the wholesale use of slow-motion in Gibson's film. His narration seeks to be neither diagnostic nor analytical; it does not set up a normal temporal frame of reference affiliated to the real world and therefore abnegates the continuum-discretion problem that afflicts modern cinematic storytelling. Rather, by charting almost the entire film in slow-motion, he conjures up a landscape where bodies are marked by an otherworldly lightness of being and movements by a glacial gravitation that is no longer earthbound. The manifold flow of the ephemeral "here" – from the innocuous dust that kicks up when the tear-drop from God's own eye falls at the foot of the cross, to the cross itself when Christ collapses with it on his shoulders – are therefore already absolved from the realm of the degraded. They are part of a total picture that, according to Gibson, is intended to be like a Caravaggio painting that moves *and* holds still. The standard Hollywood temporal gradient of dramatic ascension is thus elevated and rendered flat in those heights : every moment needs to be momentous in Gibson's filmic testament.

There is a second paradox of time. Gibson's film is quite obviously an abridged account, telescoping the last twelve hours of Christ's life into about two hours of screen time. It is at once a stretching out of the synoptic accounts in terms of durational intensity and a congealment of what would otherwise be the diurnal or the merely documentary. It is in this interstice that the travails of the humble carpenter pass onto that which is singular and providential. Occupying this virtual realm of time is of key importance for the devout who partakes in the ritual of cinema. Here time can expand details with corrosive intensity and, at the same time, compress generated affections into a pure presence that presides over and claims the entire landscape without any contingent interruptions. In the providential narrative, therefore, there can be no empty event like the little boy in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* stopping to urinate in the middle of a chase because he simply must (Bazin 1971 : 52). *Passion* – for the special flock committed to the ritualism of the film – becomes an onto-theological cinematic postulate, marked by an absolute fullness of presence.

There are about one hundred and thirty-five digital intermediate (DI) shots in *Passion*, much more than in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which had about forty. Stephen Prince notes that *Passion*, as a matter of fact, was the first Hollywood film to use extensive computer generated imagery to reinforce a periodic authenticity rather than to consolidate a fantasy (2006). The DI shots involved matte paintings, greenscreen, wire removal, miniature models, conceptual landscapes, and animatronics. The famous 'eye of God' shot morphs aerial reference shots of the action taken from a 150 foot crane into a conceptual studio model landscape. Computer graphics were then used to 'tear up' the lens. In the scourging scenes the Roman whiplashes were green screened[20]; Christ's wounds were full body prosthetics that were covered with digital skin and exposed little by little. Christ on the cross was both actor Jim Caviezel

with full body, three-dimensional prosthetics as well as an animatronic effigy with mechanical lungs. Prince observes that these torrid, extended visuals of torture impart a superhuman and therefore hyperreal aspect to the proceedings. The Roman whip or *flagrum*, used abundantly in the scourging scenes, should have caused much more blood loss and any ordinary human being subjected to such intense whipping would have died of exsanguination long before the walk through the fourteen stations could be completed and long before reaching the site of crucifixion on Golgotha[21].

The shot lengths are minimal in *The Passion of the Christ*. The camera is extremely mobile on the Steadicam, often launching into dramatic 360 degree swish pans and frequently assuming stylized low and canted angles. The film is feverishly edited and the use of the Technocrane, especially, imparts an epic verticality to some takes, specifically around the Cross, much in the grain of what Bazin called the "god-like character of the travelling and panning shots of the Hollywood crane" (Bazin 1967c : 32). The DTS/Dolby Digital sound design is remarkable in terms of invention. The background music that almost carpets the film is of diverse origins involving 'exotic' instruments like the erhu, the Chinese two-stringed violin[22]. Sound effects indeterminately recompose layers of memory and aural perception : when the Cross is turned over, the gnash of wood and metal is mixed with the time-stretched chime of a Church bell; the frustrated cry of Satan at the end is a mix of human scream and the neigh of a horse[23]. A statement on the foley work made by the supervising sound editor Kami Asgar is particularly instructive in terms of understanding how the film mobilized the standard Hollywood production machine and extended it to the absolute limits of cinematic conventions, breaking down economies of narration, embellishment, and affective power. While Gibson and other technicians talk largely in platitudes about how the sound had to be 'different' and 'real,' Asgar simply points out that library sounds – especially those pertaining to the punching, whipping, ripping out and scourging of pulsating and sweaty flesh – could not be used in this film for purely practical reasons. The industrial effects customarily used would inevitably begin to sound repetitive in a film where the violence does not come in spectacular bursts of fast moving action, but is slow, relentless, and exacting for over an hour and a half of screen time[24].

A Cult 'Realism' of the Endographic Kind

It would thus be difficult to qualify *The Passion of the Christ* as realist cinema when it comes to most ethical, ideological or aesthetic considerations that abound in major debates about modernity and modernism across the late 19th and 20th centuries. Formally the film does not conform to even a market friendly, easily digestible template of classical and pragmatic Hollywood realism. Yet, there is a strong premium placed on a certain kind of 'realism' by both the makers of the

film and audience members who spoke incessantly about the 'truth' of an experience. Mel Gibson insists on it in his commentaries; the director of photography Caleb Deschanel talks about an "emotional realism" in relation to the predominance of blue and gold in his color palate[25]. This emotional realism is visceral; it is something that 'touches' and the 'truth of experience' that it claims for itself is reliant on the potency of that touch.

The film deploys high-end imaging technology to achieve a result that, unlike the old analog medium that pre-dates Dolby surround sound and the digital image, is much more haptic and invasive in its sensuous, neuronal engagement with the viewer. In contrast to the filmic medium Walter Benjamin meditated upon, the sensuous ecological dispensation discussed here has perhaps altered the conception of phenomenological or existential externality that so much classical film theory took for granted. One could conceivably argue that it is no longer needed to meet the 'shock' of cinema 'half-way', crossing over a sovereign space of detached contemplation between the screen and the viewer[26]. The shock now tends to be more intimate; it is osmotic or endogenetic. Its virtual nature does not just draw from the truth of the image but from the shudder that births at a zone of deep absorption where it is impossible to distinguish powers and qualities inflicted externally from the internal emotive tidings that were already there.

The *Passion* as religious ritual is therefore not external as such, in an ontological sense; it offers us an alchemy by which the external apparatus activates a compelling interiority of the pious self. This compelling interiority is both galvanized as well as revealed to be in-born. As a visual scene the film is both witnessed as well as twice seen. *The Passion* can therefore be an event of its purpose only when a technological enframing of the body leads to an intensely personal yet communal spiritualism. This is made possible when unquestioning belief in Christ and his momentous sacrifice is met by an embracing of technology *that forgoes the skepticism of a scientific temperament.* In other words, if one were to deploy the much used and much abused expression of "immersive, embodied experience" in conjunction with Gibson's film, this sort of absorption is possible only when a primal belief in the momentousness of the Crucifixion is juxtaposed to an unquestioning fetishization of new age filmic artifice. The latter is now deemed to be truly equal to the task of eventing the Passion and therefore absolved from the order of science and the profane. That is not because film can now really depict the event *as it really must have happened*, but because the medium is now properly equipped to conjure up a temporal bridge *within the recesses of the self* between then and now, thus affecting the metaphysics of a 'real presence' that can be felt corporeally. 'Realism' as a signifier can operate in this situation to denote not just a world that is presented or revealed as true, but equally that which is irresistibly felt *within*.

Bergson famously claimed that perception is always inflected by memory and indeed there is no reckoning of matter without the self's interest, expectancy, and action in the world. Matter, for him, is thus "an aggregate of images" where images are "more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*". Memory is once again a 'half-way', just the "intersection" of an epiphenomenal idea of the mind and a gross materialist assumption of pure matter. For this reason precisely, affectional[27] foldings between what is deemed to be an autochthonous mind, the body of natural appetites, and the outer world of matter and stimuli can sometimes create the grounds of Memory as origin. What is then perceived is so as something that was always there, the word already written out and resonating in the recesses of the self as interiority. We can thus consider a mode of perception that is a form of pastoral power that spawns memory as preternatural. The memory can then fold back and invaginate or haunt perception itself as 'twice seen'. Such memory is a conscious recollection only so far as it is formalized in our cerebral state. This last is a part of a larger mental state which – extensive with the rest of the environment of discursive murmur from wherein subjectivities rise and lapse back into, viz., the clamorous world of belief and ideologies[28] – is the realm of ontological questionings, providence and attributes of being. In the case of Gibson's film, what is written out on the plane of embodied perception and remembered enduringly by the acolyte-viewer, even as it is being written out, is the Passion within himself. Endurance is a key factor in this process because there can be no true remembrance or a theologism of atonement without an emphatic approximation of Christ's suffering.

What I am speaking of is more than a structure of religious feeling or experience that can be ascribed positively to an individual or even an intersubjectively connected group – the *déjà vu* affiliated with the Freudian idea of the uncanny as Vivian Sobchack puts it : the "radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an irreducible ensemble" (2004 : 4)[29]. Rather I speak of the industrialization and massification of such feelings, as production, not as a phenomenology. That is, a regime of augmented sights and sounds that isn't the outcome of a visual contract between religious subjects, but one that fabricates a brave new religiosity as well as the new age bodies and subjectivities that fulfill it. While Gibson mobilizes a generic-affectional paraphernalia and an armada of clichés pertaining to American popular cinema, he does so in a manner that overwhelms an implied economy of sober cinematic formatting and conventions. The Hollywood affect machine is stretched to its limit. While filmic violence and torture can be rendered eminently spectacular and consumable in the Hollywood style, here the apparatus is deployed with a dogged irascibility that challenges thresholds of commonplace tolerance. The hundred-odd minutes of meticulously detailed, passionately augmented sights and sounds demand a special

commitment from the viewer – the capacity and the will to submit the passional body itself, and not just the meditative soul, to an endographic writing out of the Passion as figural presence. Gibson's film is a cinema of Holy entrancement, of deep absorption of penetrative sensations and therefore of the remembrance within. It seeks to set up a primal theater of affections – acute at times and fungibly distributed at other moments – *within* the *corpus* of the devout. This mediatic writing is thus a process of endography that begins at the level of the body's nerves and the tissues and calls for a nerve-wrenching *devoir* to the picture of the fearful eternal. The Passion is exacting because it has to be felt internally not as a single moment of inspiration, but as a torrid, protracted continuity of suffering and revelation (see Nietzsche 1979 : 81)[30]. This is precisely why, for some, what might seem to be an excessive, intolerable sensory overload of a sentient landscape of the self, can function as a gateway to a virtual communion with the suffering body of Christ for others. These are the two subjectivities that populate the divided 'take it or leave it' Christian world that Ebert talks about.

Conclusion

The Passion of the Christ is thus a high-tech, immersive Medieval Passion Play that disturbs modern sensibilities by detaching technology from the horizon of the scientific and the secular. If one goes by the declared onto-theological ambitions of the film – to depict the Gospel story as 'realistically' as possible, to create a virtual experience of being right at the foot of the cross – it seems that such an intent can only be made possible when an exacting cultish spiritualism of interiorization merges with an unflinching, evolutionary techo-determinism. The latter suggests that filmic technology itself had to undergo a protracted period of maturation before it could make the sensuous picture of Passion visually and aurally adequate to the fearful eternal it represents. In order to be able to achieve Passion as true Figural presence, classical cinema thus had to extinguish itself by a submission to animation; it had to overcome its founding organic and indexical obligations to the world as it is. Sound had to acquire a surrounding omniscience – a high fidelity, a burrowing echo, the pulsations of a transducer that are felt and not heard – in order to inaugurate a sonic realm where, for the true believer, there can be no doubt whatsoever that the greatest *acousmêtre* is God himself[31]. The medium, by this logic, had acquire a certain critical tenacity by 2004 ADE in order to be powerful enough in its evocative capacities to partake in the ritualism of the Figural. For only then can it facilitate a 'cutting through' to the core of being by an acute focalization of upgraded phatic powers. Only then can it bring about forceful and uncompromising riveting and absorbtion into a singular event that, for the devout, is able to set aside the clamor of the profane in the age of high capital and new media, pertaining to polarities that have been endemic to an unhappy modern consciousness – religion

and the secular, science and dogma, skepticism and belief, shock and habituation, or history and myth.

This 'cutting through' – an endographic writing in an interior cosmos – is critical for understanding the distinction Ebert posits between Gibson's 'personal film' and the 'holy (motion) pictures' of his youth. Biblical epics of the past remained in the realm of the general spectacular or the general depiction of the *external* kind. This, however, isn't to say that Edison's 1898 *Passion Play of Oberammergau* wasn't evocative enough for early film audiences in terms of symbolic import, representation or even realism. Figuring it out would require a historical sociology of the film's reception which is beyond the scope of this article. However, without being techno-deterministic ourselves, we can safely say that the technological nature of that evocation was different in those days. In 1898, the cinematic apparatus was not geared for what we have called an 'invasive endography' of the Passion. Secondly, it is likely that the spectators' bodies were 'different' in a historical sense, that is, if we think of them in terms of the overall historical arc of techno-industrial urban modernization. Thus it is reasonable to believe that the historical bodies who attended the first showing of the Lumière Cinématographe at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris on 28th December 1895 were different from us in terms of their threshold capacities to absorb the speeds, the intensities, the range and the 'critical mass' of stimuli that relentlessly radiated from the modern world and its artefacts.

More importantly, what I am suggesting is that the question of 'viscerality' should not be confused with that of realism in the modern sense of the term. The shift from the Holy pictures of the past to Gibson's *Passion* pertains to a historical displacement from an *external* representation to be contemplated, to an *internal* experience and form of writing made to absorbed and endured. What I have called here 'endographic writing' results from the fusion of a contemporary revivalist Christian psychologism with a non-modern, or better yet *amodern*, fetishization of technology achieved at the expense of scientific skepticism. The latter is *amodern* not because it involves a subjective stance that is truly medieval, but because it involves an abnegation of the chonometric, 'empty' temporal imagination that modernity uses to situate itself with regards to its 'pre' and 'post' regressions and mutations. In the process, the event becomes a *graphic* religious impelling that cuts through the 'thick skin' of the modern body otherwise well acclimated to technology and the incessant banality of the industrial world. This endography presents a challenge to the pre-digital, pre-Dolby notion that cinema requires a phenomenal externality according to which death in film – that which happens within the body – necessarily evades representation. In its quest for the cosmic interiority of piety, Gibson's film connects the sound made by the last gasp of a lacerated body with the rumble of heaven and earth as a tear drops from the eyes of the Almighty. The effect is achieved by following what Sue Tait calls the "graphic imperative" (see Black 2002)[32]

of the age of New Media, that is to say, by imagining "the interior of the body in pursuit of the site of death" (Tait 2009 : 334). This observation is all the more topical if we keep in mind the way sonogram technology has radically reconfigured the debates in the United-States surrounding abortion rights and the status of the fetus, that is, debates which seek to determine the origin of human life. When the 'graphic imperative' merges with the kind of onto-theological imagination examined here, the matter becomes not just one of colonizing the hidden processes of life, but one of *literalizing* those processes and submitting them to a greater narrative of mystery and blessedness. It is at this point that the technology of the 'graphic imperative' becomes purely instrumental, with a religiosity of its own, utterly divorced from the secular world of *techné* that spawns it. The upshot is that technological imaging ceases to allow for the tracing of ontological questions back to the horizons of history, relational human truths, finitude of representation, or the human sciences. Rather it moves the image and the ontological question toward absolutist theology.

What distinguishes the realist from the 'graphic' therefore is the idea of the secular. Auerbach is careful to remind us that the gradual embracing of random, quotidian figures, vulgar language, low styles, or sensationalist attractions in medieval Christian plays were not necessarily part of a gradual process of secularization. A state of secularization could come into being only when the onto-theological framework had been broken. On the other hand, as long as it is in place, the sensuous base, in turning our attention toward Figural meaning, can use manifold works and things from the profane world. The value of the latter, next to the momentous event that the religious evokes, is therefore limited to the merely sensuous and the decorative. Hence, just as medieval Church plays freely absorbed bawdy Roman soldiers, popular bazaar spectacles or stages awash with blood, *The Passion* can recruit computer graphics, animatronics, the immersive aural landscape of the Dolby and all other contemporary filmmaking processes into a comprehensive ritual of Figural representation well suited for an age of Mega Churches, Disneyfied religion, electronic fundamentalisms, and Creation museums. In a way, perhaps, this impulse has the features of what is commonly earmarked as the 'postmodern' moment (which I have transcoded here as the amodern), when the agonistic battles of modernity's grand narratives are in recess and the techno-financialization of the planet is marked by the rise of globalizing societies that can readily embrace technology without the ontology of science; information flows without the agon of knowledge; anti-modernist religiosities without agrarian anti-capitalisms; and highly kinetic media spheres without the rational procedures of civil societies. The imaging technology of *The Passion of the Christ*, unlike that of an earlier Heideggerian epoch, is no longer an enframing (*Gestell*) of the world as picture[33], but an enframing of the self in a consummate, amniotic cosmos of mercy and pain which Foucault,

perhaps with a chuckle of irony, could describe as "the juncture between the judgment of men and the judgment of God" (1977 : 46).

Notes

1. The website Box Office Mojo cites the figure of $611 million worldwide collections against a production budget of $30 million. See http ://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm (accessed 05/25/2014).
2. For a historical perspective, see Humphries-Brooks (2006) and Lindlof (2008).
3. The more anti-Jewish canonical text of Saint John is, for instance, given much more mileage than the still comparatively Jewish synoptic one of Matthew. It has been pointed out that one of Gibson's undeclared inspirations is the visions of the 19th century German mystic, stigmatic, and Augustinian nun Anne Catherine Emmerich, which were apparently novelized by the romantic poet Clemens Brentano. That apart, Gibson was inspired by the Passion Play tradition of the Oberammergau and the general Franciscan tradition of *Via Crucis* that came into being from the late 14th century onwards. In the latter, a ritualistic apprehension of the materiality of the Passion was institutionalized during the European middle ages through an enactment of the journey through the *Via Dolorosa* along the fourteen Stations of the Cross, perhaps to dispel the metaphysical impulses of the many-armed Gnostic ways and heretical traditions. See A. J. Droge, "Mel Gibson and Benedict Fitzgerald : *The Passion of the Christ*" (2004) and Andrew Weeks, "Between God and Gibson : German Mystical and Romantic Sources of '*The Passion of the Christ*'" (2005).
4. "Pleasure and Horror : Watching Mel Gibson's "*The Passion of the Christ*" (2004 : 2). Arenas of course challenges this notion to state that the film is a sort of "mass media ritual – the filmic equivalent of a sacrificial feast".
5. See Allison Griffiths (2007) : "The Revered Gaze : The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson's '*The Passion of the Christ*'", especially 25-26 for an illuminating discussion of audience reactions. One North Carolina viewer also compared the experience to the collapse of the Twin Towers.
6. The film can certainly be tied to a broad tradition of American Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity. However, human communities are always complex and cut across several diagrams of subjectivity. I know of a brilliant Marxist-Atheist Indian film scholar who was moved by the film. He read it as a powerful indictment of imperialist violence in the wake of the Iraq invasion of 2003. The point I am trying to make here overall is that one need not abstract an audience for this 'deeply personal' film in its maker's image.
7. Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History : Early India* (1996 : 10). Thapar draws this understanding from the ancient Sanskrit texts *Satapatha Brahmana*, *Atharva Veda*, and the *Rig Veda*.
8. I hazard this hypothesis keeping two curious things in mind. The first pertains to the fact that while, for other critics mentioned above, the visual and aural evidence of standard Hollywood clichés (camera 'trickery', Michael Bay-style editing, spine-jabbing choral effects) are quite evident, for Ebert, the 'visceral experience' takes place at a realm where such formal matters either become irrelevant or absolved. Secondly, therefore, the idea of the visceral pertains to a form of experience that disavows a core presumption of modernism : one which, as Martin Jay has pointed out, privileges vision above all other senses. Jay connects this to the birth of a dominant Cartesian rationality that, in assemblage with a linear, stereoscopic perspective of the Renaissance *Quattrocento*, birthed the "ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied" human subject that claims to navigate the world from a panoptic point of view. See Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity"

(1988 : 9-10).

9. I of course refer to Miriam Hansen's work in "The Mass Production of the Senses : Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" (1999) and Bernard Stiegler's in *Technics and Time 2* (2009).
10. This statement and all subsequent ones by Mel Gibson and the rest of the crew members of the production are cited from the production documentary entitled "By His Wounds We Are Healed" (hereafter BHW) included in the DVD extras section of *The Passion of the Christ* Blu-ray. 20th Century Fox. 1 Movie, 2 Cuts. 127 minutes. Rated R. February 17, 2009.
11. Gibson edited six minutes of violent footage for the rerelease.
12. This is a common and I think quite valid observation, made both in mainstream as well as academic quarters. See for instance Allison Griffiths (2007), Amelia Arenas (2004) and Droge (2004).
13. I'm alluding to the beautiful Kantian metaphor with which Georg Lukács begins *The Theory of the Novel*, his monumental historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature.
14. See for instance "Gibson Makes Act of Contrition in *The Passion*" in the MSNBC portal *today.com* : http ://www.today.com/id/3881874/ns/today-entertainment/t/gibson-makesact-contrition-passion/#.U4zPmPl7Jyw (Accessed 05/23/14).
15. It is exactly here that Allison Griffith locates the 'medieval imaginary' of *The Passion of the Christ*. Griffiths points out that while images of the dead Christ appeared in the Carologian period (100-600 AD), Christ on the Cross was initially serene. It was only from the 13th century that pain of the *Man of Sorrows* becomes a visible matter with blood and wounds. This transformation also entailed the suppression of Christ's ethnicity. See Griffiths, "The Revered Gaze" (18-19). In an excellent essay Peter Parshall points out that it was from the 15th century that accounts of the Passion became grisly in their detailing. In the *ars memorativa* of classical and early medieval image psychology the function of the sign was to recall a complex of feelings and ideas without graphic depiction. According to Parshall, it is a later realism that subsumes the mnemonic into the demonstrative. In an age of increasing vernacular and popular pieties, the figurative becomes subordinated to neo-classical mimesis. See Parshall, "The Art of Memory and The Passion" (1999).
16. See Auerbach's reading of the tenth canto of the *Inferno* in chapter eight of *Mimesis* entitled "Farinata and Cavalcante" (174-202).
17. I'm referring to Godard's *Le Mépris*/*Contempt* (1963), which begins with a quotation wrongly attributed to Bazin, that cinema should give us a universe that corresponds to our desires. The world is living a bad script.
18. I'm referring to Peter Wollen's groundbreaking work on film language and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce in *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (1972).
19. See Manovich's insightful analysis in *The Language of New Media* (188-211), by way of establishing his then radical thesis, *circa* 2001 : "Synthetic computer-generated imagery is not an inferior representation of our reality, but a realistic representation of a different reality" (202).
20. The section on Special Effects in the documentary on the making of the film called "By His Wounds We are Healed" (BHW) details this feature and other production details cited in this paragraph.
21. See Prince, "Beholding Blood Sacrifice" (2006). Burt Cardullo (2005) makes the same point. The flagrum itself is a greenscreen element; a body double was used and subsequently recomposed in the scenes where the whip rips out chunks of flesh.
22. Very little production sound was used, with the dialogue track almost entirely being the result of ADR.

23. "By His Wounds" section on sound work.
24. "By His Wounds" section on sound work.
25. "By His Wounds" section on cinematography.
26. The reference is to Benjamin's famous thesis in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1973).
27. When I speak of affected bodies, in all cases, I speak of bodies not marked by a separation and hierarchy between the mind and the body that is presumed by the sovereign subject of Cartesian humanism, but by a Spinozist parallelism between the two. Affect as such, in the powerful sense Deleuze draws from his work on Spinoza, is a refutation of the general Cartesian rule : that affection (*affectio*) is directly of the body while affect (*affectus*) refers to the mind. The mind, for this reason, is not imperial but analogous in relation to the body. It can form images in consciousness of transitions between affective states (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 49). For Deleuze therefore, the idea is to affirm the powers of the body beyond the knowledge we have of it, and the powers of the mind beyond the consciousness we have of it (18-22).
28. I echo Blanchot here. The rest of the environment can be considered homologous to what Freud calls the Unconscious.
29. See Allison Griffith's discussion of this trope in "The Revered Gaze" (2007 : 13).
30. It has to be borne in a reconstituted cosmos of a cultish interiority that the external manifestation of the works of cinema creates in consort with the body of the devout, by which the Word becomes emphatically manifest in the Nietzschean spirit, as "copy in sound of a nerve stimulus".
31. I'm referring of course to Michel Chion's paradigmatic thesis in *Voice in the Cinema* (1999). Chion refers to disembodied sound in cinema marked by powerful omniscience and unknown origins as *acousmêtres*. He devolves this term by combining an archaic French word *acousmatique*, meaning a sound of unidentified source and the verb *être*, or 'to be'.
32. Black's overall argument is that an increase in the graphic count in cinematic representation does not lead to increased realism.
33. See Heidegger's "The Age of the World Picture" (1977) and "Question Concerning Technology" (2006).

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Abstract

Using Mel Gibson's 2004 film and cultural phenomenon *The Passion of the Christ* as a launching pad, this essay meditates on some questions about the twentieth century legacy of competing realisms, the graphic imperative of contemporary digital image cultures, and the ontological conundrums involving technology and mass media. *Passion* is an onto-theological filmic 'event' that derives equally from an almighty religiosity as well as a cultish process of being enraptured by certain ritual values of a new-age technologism of sound and image. This endographic writing out of the Gospel narrative at the level of the tissue and nerve of the committed viewer affirms a transcendental truth already there in an internal cosmos of belief instead of working in terms of an externally navigable 'realist' representation of the world that seeks to 'bear away our faith'. This is rendered possible when unquestioning belief in Christ and in his momentous sacrifice is met by an embracing of technology *without the skepticism of a scientific temper*.

Résumé

Le film *La Passion du Christ* de Mel Gibson, phénomène culturel de l'année 2004 sert de point de départ à cet article. À partir de ce film, nous examinons l'héritage que laisse le XXe siècle en ce qui concerne le conflit des réalismes, l'impératif graphique des cultures de l'image numérique contemporaine et des dilemmes ontologiques impliquant la technologie et les médias de masse. *La Passion* est un 'événement' filmique onto-théologique qui découle autant d'une religiosité toute-puissante que d'un processus cultuel d'extase lié à certaines valeurs rituelles propre à un technologisme "Nouvel Âge" du son et de l'image. Cette écriture endographique du récit évangélique qui affecte le spectateur de manière viscérale affirme une vérité transcendantale déjà présente dans un cosmos de croyances qui dès lors se substitue à une représentation 'réaliste' et 'extériorisée' du monde, laquelle ne conduirait qu'à contester la Foi. Or, la condition de possibilité de cette écriture tient au fait que la croyance inconditionnelle dans le Christ et dans son sacrifice s'associe à une technologie (le numérique)

affranchie de tout scepticisme à caractère scientifique.

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