PREACHING TO THE CHOIR: THE CULTURE WAR AND THE BOX OFFICE SUCCESS OF MEL GIBSON'S *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

by

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This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Eric Freedman, School of Communication and Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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In 2004, Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ*, a film that focuses specifically on the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Over a year before its release and well ahead of any studio publicity, the film and its director were at the center of a discussion that sparked criticism from biblical scholars, Jesus historians, and members of the media. In spite, or perhaps because, of this controversy, *The Passion* was well-received by its audiences if not by its critics. This dissertation explores the cultural, political, and economic factors that led to the box office success of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* and also examines why viewers identified with Jesus, the protagonist of the film. First, this project places the success of *The Passion of the Christ* in socio-historical and political-economic context of 2004, emphasizing the popularity of neoliberal economic policies, conservative political thought, and Evangelical Christianity. Second, this project explores the specific political and economic arrangements that facilitated the making of the film at Cinecitta studios in Rome. The ease with which Gibson was able to make *The Passion* outside of the United States is a direct result of neoliberal economic policies that emphasize free trade and, in the process, undermine trade unions and film industry laborers. Third, in addition to a macro- and micro-level political economic analysis of *The Passion of the Christ*, this project also examines the film as it fits into the horror genre. Horror not only seeks to elicit an immediate visceral reaction from audience members but also manifests the political and economic insecurities of society. Finally, this project connects the film text to these anxieties, including the war on terror, the war in Iraq, and an extended crisis of masculinity.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my husband, editor, and dissertation coach, Alan Newton, who has given me endless encouragement, support, and love throughout every step of this process; my parents, Mark and Shirley Kuhn, who raised me to ask important questions; and my brother, John, and sister, Michelle, who have helped me search for answers. I am also grateful to my grandparents, Ottavia Ludwick and the late Sheldon Ludwick, Bernadine Kuhn, and the late John Kuhn, and my in-laws, Merlin Owen Newton and Wes Newton, whose enthusiasm and interest in my education sustain me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004, Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ,* which focuses specifically on the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, opened amidst much publicity and controversy. Over a year before its release and well ahead of any studio publicity, the film and its director were at the center of a public discussion that sparked criticism from biblical scholars, Jesus historians, and members of the dominant media. In spite, or perhaps because, of this controversy, *The Passion* was well-received, as evidenced by the fact that the film currently holds the Hollywood record for the most pre-ticket sales and is the highest grossing "R" rated film in history (Internet Movie Database 2004). Director Mel Gibson personally financed the film at a cost of $25 million, and, at the end of its run in theaters, it had grossed $370,274,604.

Due in large part to the controversy surrounding the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, much has been written about this film, with most books and articles addressing either Jewish/Christian relations (Cunningham 2004; Landres and Berenbaum 2004) or the theological precepts and historical accuracy of the film (Plate 2004; Miramax 2004). While these areas are of vital import, few scholars have explored why this film – a conservative, traditionalist Catholic telling of the Passion narrative, written and produced by a mainstream Hollywood actor cum filmmaker – was so successful. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the broader social-cultural environment at the time that the film was released. Among those who have addressed the broader social context surrounding the release of the film is Silk (2004), who describes the "culture war" that was taking place at the time mostly between Gibson as a representative of the right and those film and cultural critics who did not have a favorable impression of *The Passion* and were able to find a media platform to voice their concerns. Hammer and Kellner (2004) also look beyond the film itself and accurately describe the political climate at the time as a "period of passionate debate and global friction over the Bush administration Iraq intervention." This moment in time, they argue, was marked by a "concern over the Manichean vision that informs contemporary Islamic fundamentalism as well as Bush administration militarism and right-wing Christian fundamentalism."

These authors are to be commended for going beyond simply looking at the popularity of evangelical Christianity or the publicity that Mel Gibson caused to explain the box office success of the film. However, to fully appreciate why this film was popular when it was released, it is important to take a step back and look at the global-historical context during which the culture war emerged and the Iraq conflict (about which Silk, Hammer and Kellner write) was fought. This project reveals that the era during which *The Passion* was produced was a time of economic hardship that produced social anxieties, many of which were manifest in the film and in turn resonated with viewers.

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC/CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

The *Passion of the Christ* was created by an American filmmaker primarily for an

American audience; however, the film is a product of the cultural milieu and, consequently, the time period in which it was created. Central to the culture during this time period is the fact that the United States, the sole hegemonic power in the world, was and continues to be in a long, slow process of losing its position as the dominant player in the global social and economic arena, a phenomena that has been occurring since the late 1970s. Araghi and McMichael (forthcoming) argue that the decline in American influence and hegemony coincides with two related phenomena in world history: a second crisis of modernity and the global, political, and economic transformation of capitalism. This crisis led scholars to questioning assumptions about the relationship between capitalism and progress and the idea that a capitalist world should be seen as constituting progress (Wallerstein 2004: 18). Indeed, doubts about capitalism caused a variety of intellectual and political responses including, on the left, postmodernism, and, on the right, neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and The New Right, a traditional religious movement.

Another response, one quite helpful for this project, came to the fore as a result of the "second world historical crisis of modernity" that Araghi and McMichael (forthcoming) discuss in their study mentioned above. In 1968, many university scholars began to raise questions about the underlying structures of knowledge. In response to the crisis in knowledge, many postmodern theorists began to favor "micronarratives" in lieu of grand narratives, certain that overarching theories of history or society could not represent "truth." Unlike their postmodern cousins in the academy, world-systems theorists continued to favor grand narratives, developing the idea of the "world-system" and arguing that not all grand narratives should be thrown out. Instead, these should be replaced with narratives that better reflect reality.

When it was first explored, the idea of a “world-system” was applied to the modern world system that, scholars argued, took the form of a “world economy.” While not the first world economy, it was in fact the first world economy to flourish for such a long period of time made possible by its becoming fully capitalist in organization. Looking at history in this context is useful, Wallerstein (2004: 18) argues, as it helps scholars avoid the trap of viewing their information and data as “timeless, eternal truths.” This perspective does not indicate relativism, where all truths and positions are essentially viewed as equal or valid, but rather, it gives humility and historicity to the project of knowledge creation by admitting that ideas and concepts are bound by place and time period.

In order to perform broader analysis, scholars have to move beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries of social science to examine data and ideas that have long been viewed as the territory of others: economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and historians. By no longer recognizing the legitimacy of disciplines, Wallerstein (2004: 19) contends, these thinkers should be considered uni-disciplinary. While the world-systems perspective has been criticized at times for placing too much emphasis on the economic sphere and, at other times, too much stress on the cultural sphere, such criticism does not accurately reflect the spirit of this perspective, which seeks to “abolish the lines between economic, political, and sociocultural modes of analysis” (Wallerstein 2004: 21). In other words, while others may perceive the perspective as favoring one discipline over another, the true world-systems theorists will not privilege one "realm" (the social, political, or economic) over another, as there is only one unified realm to be examined.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

This project is undertaken very much in the spirit of world-systems analysis, as it seeks to transcend not only disciplinary boundaries but also the boundary between social science and the humanities. Wallerstein (2004: 2) explains that before the founding of the modern university, "knowledge was considered a unitary field." However, with the formal institutionalization of learning in the eighteenth century in the form of the university, there occurred a "'divorce' between philosophy and science." Another split occurred in the nineteenth century within the philosophical branch itself, producing the division between the social sciences and the humanities (Wallerstein 2004: 2; Lee and Wallerstein 2004: 4). As disciplines were divided and academic professionals formed their professional organizations and began publishing journals, areas of study came to rival one another, with each area's proponents claiming that theirs was the best and, in some cases, the only way to obtain knowledge about human nature and behavior (Wallerstein 2004: 2; Lee and Wallerstein 2004: 4).

To adequately examine the popularity of *The Passion of the Christ*, one must move beyond disciplinary confines. In this context, understanding the political-economic context within which the film was released is as important as reading the film using the tools from film studies to understand how and why audiences connected with it. In the spirit of world-systems analysis, it is important not to artificially divide the social world into political-economic and cultural realms. To do so would commit that same error made by those in film studies who have marginalized the importance of political economy and those political economists who have marginalized the importance of film, or other cultural products, such as literature, for understanding the social world. Rather, for the purpose of this project, political economy is viewed as operating in its capacity as culture; likewise, culture is viewed as operating in its capacity as political economy. In his study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, sociologist Max Weber explored the interplay between the doctrines and behaviors of Calvinist Europeans and the development of capitalism in Europe. While certainly not as wide in scope as Weber, this undertaking endeavors similarly to explore the rationalities that bind culture and the economy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MEDIATING CONCEPTS

At its core, this project is a contribution to cultural studies that seeks to understand the popularity surrounding *The Passion of the Christ* by looking at the political and economic climate surrounding its release. While this exploration draws heavily on the approach Ryan and Kellner use in *Camera Politica*, as well as the work of Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, both of which look at several different films released during a particular time period, this project is a full-length treatment of one particular film. Because this project essentially exchanges the breadth of the above mentioned projects for the depth of examining one particular film, more time is devoted to exploring the economic and political climate. In addition to making contributions to the fields of cultural studies and film studies, this study extends the work done by those who have explored the culture and psychology of the right in the United States. Also, this work is a study in the media culture of evangelical Christianity, much of which has concentrated on Christian pop and rock music as well as television and material culture (Hendershot 2004).

Ryan and Kellner's study does much to advance the world-historical approach, as it connects the major events of American society between 1967 and the mid-1980s with dominant cultural representations in popular Hollywood cinema. According to the authors, this almost twenty year period was an era where "conservative, neofascist ideas… came to populate the American cultural scene" (Ryan and Kellner 1988: xi). They argue that studying film at this time was an examination of "a culture in decline, trying to come to terms with severe economic, political, and social crises and to adjust to a world in which the United States had much less power, both economically and politically" (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 7). While the United States did seem to re-gain some of its former momentum as a global power in the in the late 1980s and early 1990s, boosted in part by the fall of the Soviet Union and the growth of the stock market in the mid-1990s, these indicators were aberrations, as the economic, political, and social crises have continued.

With the exception perhaps of documentary films, most motion pictures do not overtly address topics of current societal crisis or decline; this certainly was the case with film like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976). These two films attribute social destruction, specifically with regard to the family, to factors beyond the individual's control, like the occult or the demonic. Ryan and Kellner (1988: 170) see these films as filling emotional needs not available anywhere else in the social system and “symptomatic of fear reactions to the tremendous social changes and crises of the time period.” Likewise, *The Passion of the Christ*, set in the year 33 CE, might seem like it has very little if anything to do with our current era. In order to make effective connections between culture and cinema, it is most useful to use “mediating concepts,” or ideas and rationalities that exist in culture and are mediated or transformed before they are expressed in art – and in the case of this project, film. To understand how to arrive at these mediating concepts, it is helpful to connect three useful and related ideas: Foucault’s concept of political rationality, Ryan and Kellner’s process of “discursive transcoding,” and Raymond William’s use of the term “mediation.”

Brown (2006) borrows the term “political rationality” from Foucault, who defines it as reasoning that gives structure to governmental, economic, and citizenship practices. Therefore, more than simply setting out policies or tenets for how to manage the social world, political, economic and social philosophies have embedded in them ideas, or rationalities, about how to organize social life. Brown uses this concept specifically to reveal the rationalities embedded in neoconservatism and neoliberalism, both of which should be considered responses to the crisis of modernity, or late capitalism. To explain how these political rationalities work, it is instructive first to look at neoliberalism, which, in its purest utopian form, is an economic philosophy that emphasizes the dominance of the free market while undermining government involvement and intervention, and like any other form of economic organization, has accompanying forms of normative political reasoning. One of the primary principles of reasoning that has emerged from neoliberalism is the belief that the individual should take care of himself or herself, or extreme individualism. Observing a group of American businessmen in 1904, Max Weber wrote of the centrality of individualism in America, noting that the self-made wealthy man was valued and respected more than one who inherited his fortune. Like Weber, sociologists have historically affirmed individualism as an important organizing principle of American culture. While individualism continues to be an essential organizing principle in modern America, under neoliberalism it has taken on an altogether different meaning. Under the neoliberal ideal, the state, once viewed as protector of its citizens and the provider of the social safety net, should not be responsible for caring for citizens in times of crisis. Rather, the neoliberal agenda requires that the citizen take care of himself or herself. According to Foucault, and by extension Brown, political rationalities, like individualism, work to advance political-economic agendas as they become embedded into the consciousness of citizens and come to seem like common sense.

To understand how these political rationalities, such as neoliberal individualism, are translated to the screen, it is important to revisit Ryan and Kellner (1988: 12), who describe the process of translating social history to film, the focus of this project, as “discursive transcoding.” According to these authors, the world that we inhabit contains discourses that help us make sense of and “determine the substance and form of the everyday world” (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 12). These discourses should be viewed as operating akin to Foucault’s political rationalities, as both are systems of reasoning that give structure and sense to everyday life. Ryan and Kellner (1988: 14) argue that films take these discourses, transcode them, and make them part of cinematic narratives that in turn "create psychological dispositions that result in a particular construction of social reality." These discourses, they contend, should be viewed as ideologies, the definition of which the authors expand from its traditional Marxist understanding. According to Ryan and Kellner (1988: 14), some Marxists view ideologies as ideas and images that function to "enlist the oppressed in their own subjugation"; however, according to these authors, this view of ideology is short-sighted. Rather, ideologies should be seen as responses to social tensions and social forces that could be dangerous to the current system of inequality. These ideologies, which, for the sake of this study, should be considered synonymous with political rationalities, also can be viewed as reactions to forces that, if not responded to, could potentially tear society apart.

Therefore, internalized political rationalities are essential to legitimating the methods and modes of governance by the ruling class, a concept that Gramsci (1971) calls "hegemony." Hall (1977) explains that hegemony exists in situations where

> … a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert total social authority over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural. (P. 316)

Hall (1977) goes further to explain that hegemony succeeds when subordinate groups are either controlled or contained in an ideological space that the subordinate group views not as ideological, but as natural, ahistorical, and outside of its own particular interests. In other words, hegemony is reinforced when the ideas of the ruling class are viewed by the subordinate class as common sense. Buci-Glucksmann (1982: 117) reinforces that hegemony is “reducible neither to ideology [in the traditional Marxist sense of the term], nor to the approach of different modes of socialization.” More exactly, hegemony gains the consent of the masses “through their self-organization, starting from civil society, and in all the hegemonic apparatuses: from the factory to the school and the family” (Buci-Glucksmann 1982: 119), thus reinforcing the political and economic structure of society through culture. The necessity of “ideologies,” like that of neoliberalism’s extreme individualism, or “political rationalities,” Ryan and Kellner (1988: 14) argue, attests to the fact that something is amiss in society.

It should be noted that hegemony works on several levels of governance from individuals and states to world-systems. The key to hegemony at any level, as Hall points out above, is the dominant class not forcefully implementing ideas but rather manufacturing consent among subordinate classes in order for the dominant classes to advance their own agenda(s). The dominant class can take the form of a social group in a small community, or a major national political party, or a dominant country or groups of countries in the world system. Lee (2003: 4) observes that hegemony is a feature of the current world system that has worked to overthrow traditional structures of production and distribution and has in turn restructured labor in such a way that the existing power structure is responsible for the current state of global inequality. This system of power sharing is based on the current system of states, and because of the number of states, the power that each state asserts, and the alliances that these states share, hegemony should be viewed as a process that is shifting, what Lee describes as “incomplete.” Political rationalities, which serve as “common sense” and work, through the process of hegemony, to keep the dominant group in power, should therefore be seen as emerging from several levels – the local, state, and global, with the rationalities that emerge often intertwined. As will be shown in chapter two, the *Passion of the Christ* was written and directed during a time period when the United States was losing its position of global hegemonic power. The political rationalities that emerged and that are transcoded in the film should be seen as responses to this perceived world-historical crisis.

To understand how ideologies, or political rationalities are, in fact, "transcoded," to use Ryan and Kellner's term, in film, we can reference Raymond Williams (1977: 94) and his theorization of the relationship between art and society. He argues that the most common word used to describe this relationship has been "reflect"—as in, art "reflects" society— the problem with which, he argues, is that the term does not do justice to art's grounding in the material world and the actual work on material that constitutes the process of producing art. He suggests, instead, the term "mediation," as art does not directly reflect social realities, but rather, puts these realities through a process of mediation before they are represented (R. Williams 1977: 98).

Williams (1977: 98) argues that, when referring to the relationship between media and society, using the term "mediation" is superior to the term "reflection," in that mediation implies that the creation of art is an active rather than a passive process of representing the social world. Problematically, Williams is wedded to the old Marxist base-superstructure model, as he writes, "art does not reflect social reality, the superstructure does not reflect the base *directly* [italics Williams']; culture is a mediation of society." As mentioned above, rather than seeing the base and the superstructure existing as two separate spheres, we should view film and political economy as two different manifestations of the same sphere – again, political economy in its capacity as culture and culture in its capacity as political economy. “Mediation” occupies the theoretical space between Foucault’s “political rationalities” and Ryan and Kellner’s “discursive transcoding.” Returning to the example discussed above, we can view neoliberalism as a set of organizing economic principles that begets individualism as a supporting ideology or political rationality; when actively transformed by a filmmaker, this ideology acts as a “mediating concept” which then is “discursively transcoded” and becomes part of a filmic narrative.

The power of media to affect the life of an individual should not be underestimated. Ryan and Kellner (1988: 14) argue that “the political stakes of film are thus very high because film is part of a broader system of cultural representations which operates to create psychological dispositions that result in a particular construction of social reality, a commonly held sense of what the world is and ought to be that sustains social institutions.” Indeed, as political rationalities are articulated and in turn transcoded, they work to reinforce the status quo. Moreover, these processes contribute to the identity of the individual as “representations are internalized and adopted as part of the self” (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 13). While Ryan and Kellner limit their study to the big screen, this process of status quo reinforcement occurs on the small screen as well. In her analysis of the television show *Judge Judy*, Ouellette (2004) reveals how this particular program presents a model for neoliberal citizenship by reinforcing the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and the discourse of individual choice and responsibility.

GOALS OF THIS PROJECT/CHAPTER OUTLINE

The main objective of this project is to use mediating concepts to connect the story that the film *The Passion of the Christ* tells, as well as the way it tells the story, to what was occurring historically at the time of its writing, production, and especially its release. Chapter two focuses on describing the political economy of the United States from the 1970s to the present and identifying the political rationalities that accompanied these schools of thought. The central philosophy dominating society at this time was (and continues to be) neoliberalism, along with neoconservatism and the New Right, under the leadership of the Moral Majority. These movements contributed to increased economic instability, a widening gap between the rich and poor, and President Bush's "war on terror" being fought in both Afghanistan and Iraq. While there are many mediating concepts that emerged from the merger and dominance of these three movements, five are identified as having the most significant impact on society at the time. While they are described with more depth and detail in other chapters, briefly, these political rationalities/mediating concepts include masculinity, nationalism, victimization, militarism, and, as discussed above, individualism. Providing an overview from where these rationalities emerge is important, as other chapters refer to them in discussions of the marketing of the film and in the text of the film itself.

Like chapter two, chapter three focuses on political economy, this time turning a spotlight on how neoliberal practices and policies relate to Hollywood by specifically focusing on the context for the making and marketing of *The Passion*. Research in this chapter reveals how Gibson benefited from the economic organizing principles of neoliberalism, which, because of global labor arrangements, allowed him to film most of *The Passion* in Italy as well as perform most of the pre and post-production work at Cinecitta Studios in Rome. By rooting an analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* in a political economic framework, the film becomes more than a private religious meditation made public. Likewise, the commercial success of the film is also not simply assumed to be the sum of free and rational consumer choices made in a free market. More accurately, the film became a product of creative labor made possible in part because of foreign and domestic economic policies that aided Hollywood producers and studios. Gibson was able not only to profit from the economic policies advanced by the neoliberal agenda but also to benefit from its political rationality by using the mediating concepts of masculinity, nationalism, victimization, militarism, and individualism to promote the film – concepts that resonated with his target audience. For example, because his film had received negative press, especially from *The New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, Gibson painted himself as a victim of the liberal media, a portrait that resonated with many who spoke out in support of the film.

Chapter four looks at the text of *The Passion* and why it was popular with its viewers. Rather than conceiving of the mass media as existing either to manipulate its audience or to offer an outlet for producing works oriented toward social reform, this chapter examines the mass media appealing to its audience primarily because it addresses deep social needs. In other words, audiences look toward mass media productions because, in them, they can identify solutions to their own social problems. While Gibson's film can be read as an allegory, it is important to move beyond this reading to see where the film resonates with the political rationalities and mediating concepts mentioned above.

To find the political rationalities embedded in the film, Gibson's film is first examined as the most recent incarnation of an old art form, the passion play. At the same time, it is important to take seriously the criticism leveled against the film by several mainstream film critics that *The Passion of the Christ* reminded them more of a horror film than a spiritual meditation (Klawans 2004a; Rich 2004b; Scott 2004a; Denby 2004; O'Brien 2004; Edelstein 2004; Ansen 2004). Rather than dismiss these comments as mean-spirited attacks, this chapter takes these charges seriously, through the theory of intertextuality, to show how Gibson intentionally or unintentionally was influenced to use horror conventions in his film.

As mentioned above, Ryan and Kellner (1988) argue that horror, a genre that has historically shown tremendous flexibility and malleability, can be read as expressing the social anxieties of the time period in which any particular film was made. Specific anxieties are transcoded, to use Ryan and Kellner's term, in *The Passion of the Christ* and are expressed through the same mediating concepts of individualism, victimization, masculinity, militarism, and nationalism, addressed in the previous chapters. The aim of this chapter is not to dissect the film but rather to understand it as a cultural artifact that was part of a social process that mediated and mobilized ideologies for a specific purpose.

This chapter also examines why the "type" of Jesus presented by Gibson was so well received at this point in time. While "the Mel Gibson film" should probably not be considered a genre unto itself, as an actor, Gibson is well-known for participating in violent "action-hero" movies whose overall messages reinforce notions of hyper-masculinity. The hyper-masculine "action hero" Jesus emerges from *The Passion* in a rape-revenge scenario reminiscent of many Gibson films, and wholly replaces earlier, friendlier artistic and theological interpretations of Jesus. Prothero (2004) argues that, historically, American Protestantism has been based on Jesus-loving rather than God-fearing. *The Wall Street Journal* (2004: W19) states that until recently, the most popular artistic image of Jesus for Protestants had been Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ," a head-and-shoulders portrait of Jesus "radiating peace and serenity... while gazing lovingly at us." *The Passion of the Christ* signals a turn from the friendly, feminized, companion Jesus to a militarized personal Jesus who "takes the lash with us, exhales his last breath for us and comes to us in the 'real presence' of the Eucharist" (*Wall Street Journal* 2004: W19).

Just as a conservative backlash took place against the gains made by social movements in the 1960s, a backlash has taken place against the "social movement"-oriented Jesus of the big screen, the peace-loving, singing hippie of the musicals *Godspell* (1973) and *Jesus Christ: Superstar* (1973). The Jesus of 2004 and *The Passion* is not a peaceful shepherd, but rather a non-inclusive ultra-masculine superhero who can be viewed as the mast-head for a hate-filled movement against those who do not believe in Christianity, such as Communists (before 1990) or believers in Islam. Krondorfer

(2004) argues that Gibson's film must be read as part of a movement that began in the mid-nineteenth century and that has attempted to re-masculinize Christianity by replacing the sentimental and emotional aspects of Christianity with masculine and muscular values. This Jesus who suffers gives moral answers and explanations for the suffering that his modern-day believers have faced due to the crisis of late capitalism, or modernity. In this way, *The Passion* itself has a conservative effect by not encouraging social change or action, but by offering justification for the suffering that characterizes the status quo.

Chapter five of this study concludes by revisiting the mediating concepts discussed in this project and, by extension, assessing the future of neoliberalism and similar movements on the right, including an examination of its influence on politics and legislation in the United States and the nation. This assessment includes looking at new trends in evangelical Christianity that may cause this movement to break with the other two movements—neoliberalism and neoconservatism—in the Republican Party. Next, I examine the variety of factors that would make it unlikely for *The Passion,* during a different time period, to have the same box office success that it experienced in 2004. This different level of success does not mean that the film would not speak to or resonate with viewers today. Therefore, I discuss the way that this film might speak to viewers differently today and reflect the shift in political rationalities that has taken place since the time of the film's initial release. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining why Christian filmmakers have not been able to successfully replicate Gibson's grassroots marketing model and the reason why some “Christian” films, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, have been successful with viewers.

CHAPTER 2

NEOLIBERALISM, NEOCONSERVATISM, AND THE NEW RIGHT: CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES TO MODERNITY

INTRODUCTION

Three movements make up contemporary American conservatism, often referred to today simply as “the right”: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the New Right. By placing them in the global-historical context from which they emerged, this chapter describes the birth of these movements and also the political rationalities that accompanied them. To better understand the development of neoliberalism, the movement that has been the most influential, this examination traces the rise and fall of the United States as a global superpower to contextualize the nation’s global standing in 2004, the year *The Passion of the Christ* was released. Individualism, the central political rationality to develop from this economic system, is examined in depth. Next, the chapter looks at the New Right, the name given to the organized, politically- motivated, conservative Christian group, exploring its inception as the Moral Majority in the 1970s, its linking to the neoliberal movement and becoming a part of the Republican Party, and its home in the evangelical Christian movement today. While the organizational structure of this movement has changed, their anti-feminist agenda has been consistent, making the primary rationality developing from this movement an emphasis on masculinity. Finally, the history of neoconservatism and its foreign policy agenda are considered, along with its accompanying political rationality, nationalism, which functions as a response to the view that the United States is weakening and losing influence in the world. This nationalism has manifested itself as a support for unilateral militarism, another important political rationality explored, and one that resonates, in this context, with both individualism and masculinity.

While neoliberals, neoconservatives, and the New Right have influenced different levels and branches of government and encouraged rationalities at great social cost, perhaps the "greatest" legacy of their fusion has been the dismantling of the welfare state, the next topic of focus. Just as the economic situation for many Americans has become less stable due to the implementation of neoliberal policies, the welfare state, the only economic safety net for many citizens, is being systematically compromised. Moreover, those who are perceived as receiving the most help from the state, single mothers and Hispanic and African-American minorities, are seen by the right as morally compromised and in turn as weakening the nation socially and economically. The irony of this, addressed in the next section of the chapter, is that under the neoliberal economic regime, businesses, rather than citizens, are more likely to receive assistance from the state. However, they are not viewed as weak or morally compromising the state. Their cozy relationship with government, in fact, has come more to resemble fascism rather than democracy, a fact that should disturb pro-democracy neoconservatives.

While those who find themselves unable to cope with the economic instability created by neoliberal economic policies are the real victims, the right has masterfully painted themselves as victims, the final political rationality to emerge from this fusion of movements. To conclude, the chapter examines the victimization status advanced by those on the right, which is due less to the compromised financial situation that some conservatives face than to their painting themselves as the targets of cultural liberals, Islamic radicals, and even the government itself.

NEOLIBERALISM – FROM IDEA TO POLICY

From Regional Leader to Global Hegemon

Before World War I, the United States was the regional leader in the Americas. While this in part limited the power of Great Britain, the global superpower at the time, the U.S. was still dependent on Great Britain to ensure global stability (Arrighi, Hui, Ray and, Reifer 1999: 78). When the 19th century world order collapsed between 1929 and 1931 with the global Great Depression, Great Britain's focus turned inward as it concentrated on protecting its crumbling far-flung empire. With the signing of the high-tariff inducing Smoot-Hawley bill of 1929 and the Great Crash of 1930, attention began to shift to the United States as the global financial leader. These two events essentially solidified the establishment of a new world order with the United States as the center (Arrighi et al. 1999).

With the essential role it played in rebuilding Europe during 1945-1965, ensuring peace and stability in the region after the world wars, the United States, Cox (1983) argues, founded a new, albeit short lived, hegemonic order. This new global order was further solidified with the establishment of the Bretton Woods system of international financial and monetary regulation, specifically the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The founding of these institutions, headquartered in Washington, D.C., formally shifted global economic power to the United States. Further adding to the economic prowess and leadership of the United States was a shift in American foreign policy. Arrighi et al. (1999: 87) argue that under the leadership of President Harold Truman, the United States replaced the "one-worldism" of Franklin Roosevelt, a policy that would work to incorporate communist Russia into the world order, with a "free-worldist" policy of containment that not only worked to effectively exclude Russia from the global social and economic order but also created a polarity between the capitalist West and Soviet East. This ideology was bolstered by economic expansion and the ushering in of a golden age of capitalism in the 1950s and 1960s. The dominance of capitalism and the United States' role as leader of the capitalist world began to wane in the 1970s with America's embarrassing military defeat in Vietnam. Likewise, the IMF's switch to floating exchange rates compromised the Bretton Woods monetary system, as the dollar was no longer the global currency against which all other currencies were measured. While the United States is still considered the global leader, or hegemon, today, it is a weakened power. This crisis, Arrighi et al. contend, has yet to be resolved.

Similar to the period of British hegemony from 1850-1870, the 1950s and 1960s were dominated by forward and outward-looking views by the public including a sense that progress was or would be taking place (Araghi and McMichael 2004). In both time periods, these views resulted in a "secular this-worldliness and utopianism" that, while aware of the past, favored the present and the future and anticipated continued social, political, and economic progress. The outgrowth of this was strengthened social support for the institutions of capitalism (Araghi and McMichael, forthcoming).

The Crisis of Modernity

This period of historical transition has led to a variety of responses from intellectuals, religious leaders, and governmental officials, indicating, at best, a cultural shift and, at worst, a crisis. Araghi and McMichael (forthcoming) explain that more radical postmodern thinkers see themselves as following, or replacing, modern thought. In brief, the postmodern critique replaces the overarching grand narratives of history with "micronarratives," "localism," and an "abstract particularism" that distances itself from the universalizing thought. Araghi and McMichael (forthcoming) argue that a more useful characterization follows Best and Kellner (1991) and views postmodernism as a "condition of transition."

If responses on the left call for an end to generalizing narratives, then responses on the right can be seen as calls to protect the meta-narrative, in particular, one that is written with the United States, the protector of capitalism, democracy and morality, as the global superpower and central character. To accomplish these tasks, these responses call for a build-up and assertion of military power, legislative attempts to regulate citizens' morality, and the implementation of selective and strategic "free market" policies to rekindle the golden age of capitalism. Each of these goals has a corresponding school of thought or social movement to support it. In brief, neoliberals, or economic libertarians, embrace the unfettered economic power of the free market, while neoconservatives promote democracy through the assertion of military strength. Religious traditionalists, as embodied in the politically organized New Right, are interested in the moral reformation of society, often through state and national politics. Wolfson (2004: 216) describes these schools of thought as “several fundamental alternatives within conservatism as a whole.” He goes further to equate neoconservatism with “a natural conservative response to modernity, at least in America, one with its own distinctive qualities, its own style and substance, its strengths and weaknesses.” Wolfson could just as easily be writing about neoliberalism and traditionalism.

While each of the movements represents an answer to the crisis of modernity, Wolfson (2004) carefully points out that each has a different relationship with the modern world. He argues that economic libertarians have found themselves at home, embracing the technological and economic changes that have accompanied modernity. They see these changes as aiding in human freedom and oppose almost all regulations, whether market or moral, and view society and humanity as a whole benefiting from expanded economic choices and social freedoms (Wolfson 2004: 220). Wolfson (2004: 220) argues that since the 1950s, this strain of thinking has been the most important and influential for the United States Republican party, informing policy-making and general conservative ideology. The success of neoliberal policies has been so central to the right that the other two responses to modernity, traditionalism and neoconservatism, would not have had a political platform without it. Traditionalists, the view that closely resonates with those on the Religious Right, have an antagonistic relationship with modernity, viewing modern life as having compromised the moral fabric of the nation. The response is a romanticizing of the 1950s accompanied by the longing for the "good old days" of small-town America and close-knit communities (Hardisty 1999: 19; Wolfson 2004: 219). The last group mentioned here[1], neoconservatives, Wolfson argues, have found themselves in the middle of the right. Like the religious traditionalists, they find tradition valuable, but rather than see it as model for current living use it as a guide for making future decisions. Perhaps best known for their foreign policy positions, especially their staunch anticommunism, neoconservatives focus primarily on educating for and upholding democracy in America and abroad, as it is viewed as the best form of government to promote liberty and equality (Wolfson 2004: 223). While these schools of thought each contain strains and tenets unique to each school's way of thinking, there is a significant amount of ideological overlap between the three. The great project for American conservatism of the 1950s and 1960s, Wolfson (2004: 222) argues, was reconciling the three. In exploring how the right reached its recent incarnation, it is best to begin with the history of neoliberalism, as it has, more than any other movement, directed the action of the right and in part led to the political prominence of the other two movements.

Markets as Human Institutions

To under understand the historical context from which the ideologies of the right evolved and the impact that they are presently having on our culture one must understand the rise and fall of the United States as the global economic and political leader from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the 1970s. In the study of any economic issue, especially those that concern the economy of a nation, group of nations, or even the globe, it is important to keep in mind that markets are not independent entities, free from the influences of human action. Perhaps because of Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand," markets have come to be seen as balancing supply and demand on their own and operating "magically" or independent of human intervention. Writing in 1944, Karl Polanyi (1944:74), as a corrective to this way of thinking, suggests keeping government involvement, as well as its purposeful or unintentional lack of involvement, at the center of any economic exploration. Following Polanyi's lead, Block and Somers (1984: 54) argue that the capitalist market that we know today should not be seen as evolving naturally, but as a "by-product of state building strategies."

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[1] Wolfson (2004) also mentions a fourth group, paleoconservatives, whom he characterizes as pseudo-radicals more than reactionaries. Led by figures such as Pat Buchanan, this group calls for an isolationist, anti-immigrant, pro-life right wing agenda. While they are important to mention when discussing right wing movements, they are tangential to this discussion.

When examining recent economic history, one can see numerous examples of governmental intervention shaping the United States' economy. While governmental intervention has remained constant, the policies governing capitalism after the Great Depression are quite different from contemporary regulations pertaining to labor and especially finance. Polanyi (1944) reveals that in the development and governance of markets, policies have vacillated between government regulation, overt market intervention and worker protection on the one hand, and an intentional lack of state intervention and defense of labor on the other. The Great Depression of the 1930s was seen as a failure of the free market, and as an extension, a failure of liberal democratic governments to protect and provide for their citizens. In response, economist John

Maynard Keynes developed a set of policies based on government spending to spur economic growth and ensure stability. Specifically, Keynesian policies restricted certain types of domestic and international finance capital, implemented macroeconomic interventions to stimulate economic growth, and instigated labor and welfare protections (Campbell 2005: 189). By striking a compromise between labor and capital and ending wide-spread unemployment, Western democracies developed what Harvey (2005) calls "embedded liberalism." While these policies were interrupted by the Second World War, market regulation continued during and after the war, at which time the tools of modern monetary and fiscal policy were developed, including government controls on interest rates and increased spending and taxes (Palley 2005: 20). In addition to the increased number of government protections, citizens took measures to guard their employment situations and workplace conditions by joining unions in historic numbers (Palley 2005: 20).

The Golden Age of Capitalism

After World War II, the United States spearheaded a major global economic intervention in June of 1947 in the form of the Marshall Plan, which, by providing grants to the war-devastated economies of Western Europe, made the United States the leader of the "free" world. By rehabilitating the French and German economies and making them viable trading partners with the United States, the world was again made "safe for capitalism" (George 2000: 27; McMichael 2004: 41). Due in part to the Marshall Plan, the post-World War II reconstruction of Europe occurred very quickly and with minimal debt to the devastated nations. Marshall Plan money was given in the form of grants and with few requirements of the recipient countries. This means that the countries could use the funds in ways that would most benefit their citizens (Bienefeld 2005: 15). The result of this post-war political and economic stability was a phase of near-full employment and great optimism in recipient countries as well as in the United States. This was especially significant in the era of the Cold War, when the United States used its economic clout and growth to lead the capitalist nations and compete with the Soviet Union. In addition to assisting Western Europe, the U.S. offered financial aid to many nations of the global south in hopes of cultivating more trading partners while at the same time containing the spread of communism (McMichael 2004: 41). By strengthening and legitimizing capitalism, the United States ensured an open world economy opposed to the Soviet-engineered self-reliant Eastern European trading bloc.

It is important to keep in mind that the “free” world did not actually have “free” markets, or economies without oversight or regulation. On the contrary, providing coordination and governance for the capitalist world economy were the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both established three years prior to the implementation of the Marshall Plan (McMichael 2004: 43). In addition to coordinating the global economy in hopes of preventing another worldwide depression, one of the initial purposes of these institutions was to distribute credit to regions devastated by war or colonialism. While these institutions may have been given global monikers, it is important to note that from their inception they were and continue to be heavily influenced by the United States Treasury Department (McMichael 2004: 43). In fact, it is not by coincidence that the headquarters for all three organizations are geographically close to each other in downtown Washington, D.C. Specifically, the initial purpose of the World Bank was to borrow money in international capital markets and raise funds for development, while the charge of the International Monetary Fund was to stabilize national currency exchanges and regulate the system of fixed exchange rates (McMichael 2004: 43). While the expressed goal of the Bretton Woods system was to increase the standard of living on a global scale, the programs had a predictable First World bias. This bias can be seen in the large-scale capital-intensive projects exported to the third world, in the name of economic growth and development, but managed by and economically advantageous to corporations in the first world (McMichael 2004: 45).

While the development projects supported by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank did lead to some increases in the overall global standard of living, the intensification of the Cold War changed the nature of the United States' foreign policy and, as a result, the nature of its foreign aid. Rather than pursuing the more inclusive policies promoted by Franklin Roosevelt, exemplified by the founding of the United Nations, the United States' foreign policy became more exclusionary and focused on strengthening the free world and undermining the communist world. Under President Harry Truman, the focus shifted to keeping the United States as the central and most important player in the global capitalist economy. Rather than encouraging international unity through the United Nations, as Roosevelt envisioned, America unilaterally promoted a policy of political and economic "freedom" that advanced the U.S. dollar as the leading international currency (McMichael 2004: 74). Under the Bretton Woods agreement, governments were expected to maintain a fixed exchange rate against the dollar while the Federal Reserve Bank of New York was obligated to keep the dollar convertible at a rate of $35 per fine gold ounce.

Touraine (2001: 10) points out that after World War II, most countries of the global north developed projects or plans that would not only strengthen their own national economies but also integrate them into the global economy. Arrighi and Silver (1999: 14) argue that Western elites were able to strengthen their position in global economy by co-opting their citizenry's militant working classes. At this point, it is instructive to recall Gramsci's notion of hegemony, the strategy by which elites rule through manufacturing the consent of the governed by creating and ensuring the internalization of political rationalities. Western elites were able to co-opt the support of the working class, those who suffered the most in the Great Depression, through a strategy of "suffrage, the welfare state, and a double nationalism" that on one level had workers rallying around and supporting their own country and on a much broader level supporting the states of the white world and advancing a racist agenda. However, as Arrighi and Silver (1991: 14) point out, this was a strategy that was too expensive to export to the developing non-Western world. While many countries in the global north were doing well after the implementation of the Marshall plan, this unfortunately was not the case for the countries of the global south. In fact, the policy of unilateral dominance, regulated primarily through the Federal Reserve, resulted in a widening gap between global north and global south living standards (McMichael 2004: 74). The position of The United States, specifically, in relation to the global south was further strengthened in 1965 when, under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson, the Central Intelligence

Agency sponsored an overthrow of the first President of Indonesia, Sukarno. After the coup, meetings took place between the new government officials and private business leaders in the United States to negotiate contracts to build the infrastructure of the country. This blatant intervention in the governance of another country, coupled with the promotion of free enterprise through American businesses, marked another shift in United States foreign policy, where promoting trade and strengthening economic relationships among nations again took precedence over promoting international cooperation, sovereignty, or democracy.

International Economic Crises

The hopefulness that marked the post-World War II era began to wane in the early 1970s when underlying imbalances between nations began to erupt. This inequity was caused in part by the accumulation of surplus dollars outside of the United States. The flight of dollars from the United States was partly the result of the Marshall Plan, as well as U.S. interventions in Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam (Toporowski 2005: 106). Dollars that were held outside of the United States were principally located in unofficial and unregulated markets that emerged first in London and Singapore (Toporowski 2005: 108). Because so many international actors held dollars, it became exceedingly difficult for the United States government to monitor the trade of its currency offshore. Especially difficult was the fact that these unregulated "Euromarkets" offered more attractive interest rates than those in the regulated markets of the United States. Interestingly, many of the Euromarket banks, though located overseas, were American-based (McMichael 2004: 123). When foreign dollar holders demanded that their currency be exchanged for gold, this created a troubling outflow of gold reserves and a fear from U.S. officials that the country’s role as superpower was diminishing as the nation was losing its ability to control what happened to its own currency (Bello, Malhotra, Bullard, and Mezza 2000: 3; Dumenil and Levy 2005: 10).

Anxiety over unregulated dollars was compounded during the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil embargo of the early 1970s, when Middle Eastern countries built massive dollar and European currency surpluses and invested these funds in the private banks of the Euromarket as well as other industrial countries. Since the dollar’s value was diminished with respect to both gold and other currencies, on August 15, 1971, economic policy makers in the United States, rather than see the nation lose its economic centrality, unilaterally took the dollar off of the gold standard. Eighteen months later, the multi-lateral Smithsonian agreement resulted in the current system of floating exchange rates (McMichael 2004: 124). While Dumenil and Levy (2005: 10) contend that it is difficult to point to a specific year or event that heralded in the era of neoliberal reform, they argue that this implementation of the floating exchange was a watershed event that ushered in a number of international market transformations including the loosening of rules associated with financial capital. Touraine (2001: 10) argues that the OPEC oil crisis marked a new era of economic globalization, as states that had formerly not been major economic players, like Japan and Korea, began to prioritize exports and grew competitive with industrialized countries. These perceived threats from other countries led to the feeling among American political leaders that the United States should be freed of economic rules and regulations, many of which were put in place in the name of promoting social equality among nations (Touraine 2001: 10).

The liberalization of currency trade signaled, for the first time since World War II, that embedded liberalism was beginning to break down and no immediate answer appeared that would solve these macroeconomic problems. One possibility was for the United States to adopt a neo-Keynesian approach that would deepen state control, regulate the market through corporatist strategies, and expand the social welfare state (Harvey 2005: 13). The other possibility, the opposite of Keynesianism, centered on deregulating government, favoring business over labor, and diminishing the welfare state.

After the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, the major economies of the global north fell into deep inflationary recessions accompanied by high unemployment, or “stagflation” conditions. During this time, the price of raw materials, especially crude oil, rose sharply. The leaders from those sparsely populated countries that exported oil placed the profits from this price spike in banks in the global north. In 1973, New York investment banks called for lending the surplus funds they gained from oil investors to other foreign governments, many in the global south. This required the liberalization of international credit and financial markets (Harvey 2005: 28). President Ford answered this call in 1974 by lifting finance restrictions and curbing capital flow (Dumenil and Levy 2005: 10). Many of these loans, made to countries in the global south, were taken out in order to finance development projects set in place by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Toporowski 2005: 108). Arrighi and Silver (1999: 14) argue that by following the programs prescribed by leaders in the global north, leaders in the global south were attempting to make good on the promises of development made by leaders in the global north using the same strategies Western elites did in the 1950s and 1960s. To fulfill these goals, leaders of global south nations borrowed funds from the private lenders, finding this much easier than going though central banks. Private banks often did not attach conditions to the money they loaned and did not require lenders to submit to the foreign currency borrowing regulations attached to central banks (McMichael 2004: 127). Unfortunately, many leaders of these countries borrowed money at unsustainable levels, sometimes using this money for personal projects or to strengthen military might, which, obviously, did little to economically strengthen their countries. In addition, many of these loans were made in dollars, and when interest rates increased on their loans, these countries were even more economically vulnerable (Harvey 2005: 28-29).

Bienefeld (1991: 15) argues that the liberalization of currency trade and commodity markets made international economic cooperation more and more challenging. Also, national governments in the global north experienced a slowing of capital accumulation and found it difficult to finance their budget deficits. As a result, these states implemented restrictive monetary policies and cut state expenditures. Because the economic problems individual countries were experiencing were international in scope, in the last years of his Presidency, Jimmy Carter called for, ala Franklin Roosevelt, international economic cooperation; while German officials showed interest, no other leaders responded to his call (Dumenil and Levy 2005: 11). In the United States, the need to curb inflation led to Carter’s 1979 nomination of Paul Volker to the position of Federal Reserve chairman. Volker, who had the reputation of being a "hard money" man, announced a tightening of the money supply two months after his appointment (Campbell 2005: 194). While confidence in the dollar was restored, the result was increased interest rates of between six and eight percent (Dumenil and Levy 2005: 11). In 1980, inflation rose to 13.5%. The global crisis was described by proponents of neoliberalism as resulting from excessive government intervention, or Keynesian policies run amok, and solidified the new era of "market-driven" neo-liberal policies (Campbell 2005). These policies were not restricted to the United States. For example, in 1979, the era of neoliberal policies in the United Kingdom was ushered in with the election of Margaret Thatcher. Other European countries followed with their own neoliberal reforms in the 1980s (Dumenil and Levy 2005: 11).

The Fall of the US, the Transformation of the IMF, and the Neoliberal Response

While governments of the first world struggled to grow employment and control inflation, the accumulated debt of the borrower nations reached a crisis of international proportions (Toporowski 2005: 106). In December 1982, the governments of Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Poland declared that they were unable to sustain their foreign debt obligations (Toporowski 2005: 108). Rather than allowing the banks, many American, that had loaned money to the debtor nations to fail, which would have been a true free market response, American governmental officials convinced members of the financial community that a catastrophe would befall the global economy if American banks were to collapse and implemented a policy that made it impossible for debtor nations to default on their loans (Toporowski 2005: 109). Conveniently, economists had a model for economic stability based on reforms implemented by advisors in Chile five years earlier. Harvey (2005: 8) writes that economists from the University of Chicago, known as the "Chicago Boys," who studied under free market guru Milton Friedman, were called on to reconstruct the flailing Chilean economy. This experiment in implementing free market fundamentalist neoliberal policies was eventually replicated in other nations of the global south countries and eventually became the model for solving the economic problems faced by the global north as well.

Harvey (2005: 29) writes that by 1982, all Keynesian influences had been purged from the IMF and World Bank, and these two institutions became centers for propagating and enforcing "free market fundamentalism." As a result, the IMF and the World Bank decided they would acquire some of the private debt owed by the governments of the Third World countries. In return, these debtor countries came under the control, or "debt regime" loan management program, of the First World. The fundamental assumption at the heart of this program was that the international order was not responsible for the present economic condition of the global south, and that if these debt-ravaged countries would follow the market-based prescriptions laid out by the financial wizards of the global north, they too could be free of their debt burdens, grow their economies, and eventually became integrated into the global capitalist market. To receive help in managing their debt, countries were forced to follow prescriptive guidelines, or structural adjustment policies, given by the newly rehabilitated International Monetary Fund (which had lost its primary role and position of importance after the collapse of the fixed exchange rate system) (Toporowski 2005: 109; McMichael 2004: 133-4).

Neoliberal reformers hoped to return to the golden age of capitalism by implementing the above policies. The fundamental belief and goal of these structural adjustment programs was the same one that was changing the face of capitalism in the first world: economic growth through the growth of private enterprise which, neoliberal thinkers contended, could best occur with minimal, if any, government regulation. The hope was that businesses would improve their profits and increase their capital accumulation and the profits would "trickle down" and benefit workers (Campbell 2005). In fact, when these policies were implemented in the global south, no one could fully predict the outcome or how exactly economic problems would be solved (Harvey 2005: 13). Indeed, it would not be until the 1990s that a neoliberal ideology would develop into a coherent school of thought under the "Washington Consensus" (Harvey 2005: 13). This school of thought was given an additional legitimizing boost with the fall of the Soviet Union, occurring at roughly the same time. With communism no longer its threat or a rival, capitalism came to be seen as the victorious economic system and, in fact, many neoliberal policies were applied to the shattered economies of the former Soviet countries patterned on the same experimental policies that were instituted in the global south.

Overall, the neoliberal economic initiative evolved to emphasize four key measures for national governments to implement: liberalized or free trade, fiscal austerity, privatization, and deregulation. Initial stabilization measures required countries to liberalize trade by importing fewer products in order to reduce the imbalance of payments between themselves and other countries (McMichael 2004: 133-4). This was done by reducing import quotas, developing less-restrictive tariffs, and eventually reducing both tariffs and export subsidies (Pieper and Taylor 1998). Subsequently, governments were required to put fiscal austerity measures in place, which forced governments to cut social spending on state-sponsored services (McMichael 2004: 133-4). This was done mostly to require governments to maintain balanced budgets; unfortunately, the cuts mostly affected the poor, as welfare programs were often seen as an investment that did not provide a direct and measurable monetary return.

Another prescription of structural adjustment required countries to privatize their state-managed pensions by placing the funds into their newly-created stock markets. The projected outcome of this project was that investing pension funds would grow the market to a viable level and, in turn, attract foreign investment. This foreign capital, in theory, would help to stabilize the country's exchange rate. However, government deregulation rolled back protections put in place for domestic investors and workers. As well, financial liberalization required countries to lift regulation on finance capital and problems occurred with currency stabilization. With no international protection or regulation, in-flows of capital could exit a country much more quickly than they entered, causing an economy to collapse (Toporowski 2005: 106). While this lack of regulation all but ensured that investors made a profit, the draining of currency was a primary reason for the economic collapses that affected both Mexico and East Asia in the late 1990s (Campbell 2005).

Neoliberalism and the Strong Individual

To understand how a generation of citizens whose orientation, because of their experience with the Great Depression, was mostly Keynesian in outlook gave way to a generation who advocated neoliberal economic policies, it is helpful to revisit Foucault's notion of "political rationality" as applied by Brown (2006) and discussed in the introduction. Brown (2006: 693) offers that, to be successful, neoliberalism is reinforced by cognitive models that give citizens "a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state." Therefore, neoliberalism is more than the sum of its specific economic consequences that include the dismantling of the welfare state, privatization of public services in the global north, and the deterioration of economic self-direction and sovereignty in the global south. Brown (2006) borrows the term "political rationality" from Foucault, who defines it as "a form of normative political reasoning organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship." Neoliberalism, therefore, goes beyond its emphasis on economic organization and applies its principles to other realms of social life. Brown (2006: 693), in discussing the political rationality of neoliberalism, argues that its governance of the social is not accidental or "the leakage from the economic to other spheres but rather the explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality on these spheres."

Brown (2006) points to three main rationalities that have emerged from neoliberalism. The first rationality asserts that the current state of the market was achieved and made normative through engineered social and economic policy, which implies that other feats of governance can be accomplished in similar fashion. A second rationality is the requirement of the government to behave in the same manner as the market; this is reflected in how government-speak has come to reflect market-speak. For example, in 2004, President Bush declared that, through election to a second term, he earned “political capital.” The last rationality feature is the belief that the political and social spheres should be dominated by market concerns and organized according to market principles. This includes measuring citizens’ morality by their capacity for economic “self care” and their ability to service their own material ambition and provide for their own needs, thus taking the American social ideal of individualism to its extreme.

Individualistic thinking is inherent to the logic of capitalism and not just the neoliberal organization of capitalism. Living in a capitalist society meant that the individual was no longer bound to the land, as were serfs in the economic system that historically preceded capitalism, but rather was “free” to sell his or her labor in the market place in exchange for a wage (Mandel 1990: 47). This relationship between the laborer, capitalist, and wages is the one that continues today. Lefebvre (1958: 233) reflects that this “freedom” the individual worker seems to feel is an illusion, as “within the framework of bourgeois society (and the capitalist regime) work is lived and undergone by the worker as an alien and oppressive power.” While wages may belong to the individual, labor does not. Additionally, participation in the division of labor system is not a choice but is imposed on the worker who no longer works for himself or herself (Lefebvre 1958: 233). Durkheim (1984: 3) notes that in modern society, an individual’s position in the division of labor system takes on the character of “a categorical rule of behavior,” one that is imposed on society’s members as “a duty.” Capitalism produces an extreme feeling of alienation and isolation for individual workers, who are connected to neither the products of their labor nor their families, as labor has moved outside of the home. Labor, for Weber (2002: 54), is seen as an end in and of itself, or a calling, which requires the individual to be virtuous and proficient in his or her task within the capitalistic system. Under neoliberalism, as well, labor is viewed as a calling to which an individual responds, and, as will be illustrated below, comes to take on a moral overtone. When a citizen is able to care and provide for himself or herself without depending on the welfare state, that individual is viewed as a moral being. Likewise, those who are dependent on the state are seen as immoral. As discussed below, those who are unable to provide for themselves have come to be viewed as tearing apart the very moral fabric of society.

In addition to taking on a moral tone, individualism and freedoms of capitalism have been redefined under the neoliberal regime. While individuals are still “free” to sell their labor in the marketplace, the idea of “freedom” has morphed into “freedom of the market” and “free trade” (Harvey 2005: 7). This rhetorical move has become quite important to advancing the neoliberal agenda, as an attack on the free market and free trade has been equated with an attack on individual freedom. The centrality of the individual and the protection of his or her freedoms have become an embedded political rationality that now resonates as “common sense.” Anderson (1990: 115) illustrates this phenomenon, noting that today “it takes a most unconventional American to think of himself or herself as an inseparable part of society, and to know that its culture is an internalized part of his or her personal psyche.” The political rationality of extreme individualism and its associations with “freedom” provide purpose and meaning for citizens in terms of their individual commitment to work, while also advancing the neoliberal economic agenda. As will be discussed in chapter three, Mel Gibson was able to capitalize on the rhetoric of individualism to promote *The Passion*, painting himself as a Hollywood outsider and maverick. Likewise, as will be shown in chapter four, Gibson’s Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* embodies this extreme individualistic rationality. To understand fully how neoliberalism, an amoral, pseudo-scientific model for economic growth, came to take on a moral, or ethical tone, it is important to view it in a field with the two other movements on the right – the New Right and neoconservatism.

WINNING HEARTS, MINDS, AND SOULS: THE TRIUMPH OF NEOLIBERALISM

Harvey (2005: 39) points out that in countries like Argentina and Chile, neoliberal policies were so unpopular that they could be implemented only by military coup. However, this was not the case in the West, where the neoliberal transformation was validated through democratic means and with ideas about the free market eventually becoming “common sense.” Harvey traces the promotion of these policies to several sources. In large part, he argues, this new perspective on the market was accomplished through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s deliberate proliferation of a pro-business agenda on the local and national levels. The agenda was bolstered by the Heritage Foundation and other conservative think-tanks such as the National Bureau of Economics Research, which developed close ties to the business schools of major universities, institutions that eventually became major proliferators of anti-government sentiment (Harvey 2005: 44). With this campaign taking place behind the scenes and in the background, capital restructuring and deindustrialization were taking place in many major cities – most notably New York. When New York City experienced financial disarray in the 1980s, due to its large budget deficits, lawmakers chose not to help out the city, but rather followed the model that was used by the IMF for Chile – propose an economic bailout that was so austere and painful as to ensure that others would not want to undergo it (Harvey 2005: 45-47). New York provided a test case for implementing neoliberal practices domestically. The result, Harvey notes, was that bondholders won at the expense of the citizens who were employed by the city or relied on the city for social services (Brustein 2005).

In the 1970s, Harvey (2005: 48) contends, as neoliberal policies were becoming entrenched and business was refining its ability to act as a coherent class and articulate specific interests, neoliberals realized that they needed a political instrument and popular base of support to ensure the implementation of the policies that would serve their interest. Therefore, they sought to capture the Republican Party as their representative organization and worked to make changes in campaign finance laws to ensure that PACs, or Political Action Committees, could monetarily support political campaigns. They also sought out strategic alliances with two groups: the New Right, a group of conservative Christians who had recently become politically active in 1978 with the founding of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, and neoconservatives, many of whom were secular in orientation but harbored deep concerns about the weakening of the United States in the realm of foreign policy, especially the perceived communist threat and the growth of the welfare state.

By aligning with these two groups, the neoliberals widened their base of support and gave their agenda a much-needed moral dimension. The New Right and the neoconservatives aligned with the neoliberals as a way to advance their agendas, as well, even if contradictions existed between the different philosophical systems. While "the New Right was religious in objective, language and membership, with its eye ultimately on the City of God," the neoconservatives, secular in outlook and rhetoric, were primarily concerned with promoting American values (read: democracy) around the world and maintaining American global dominance (Edwards 1999: 197; *Christian Science Monitor* 2004). While neoconservatives embraced government and the implementation of public policy, they were generally opposed to getting mired in the details of politics, unlike the New Right, which embraced the mechanics of politics but were deeply suspicious of the government. Ultimately, these two branches were able to unify behind a policy of fierce anticommunism and resistance to the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with Ronald Reagan presiding as the minister over what amounted to a marriage of convenience. It is important to point out that while the philosophies of neoconservatism and the New Right found common ground, neoliberalism, at its core, is quite contradictory. Where neoliberalism is fundamentally libertarian in outlook and focuses on individualism and lack of government rule over the market, the moral agenda of the New Right and neoconservatism asks the state to intervene in the private lives of citizens specifically with regard to sexuality and foreign policy. Despite these fundamental contradictions, neoliberalism sought common ground with these other movements, as discussed below.

Making the Market Moral

For the purpose of her analysis, Brown (2006) conflates neoliberals and those on the Religious Right, seeing them as advancing an agenda that is morally legitimized. Brown explains that the heart of the neoconservative foreign policy agenda links power with morality to advance the belief that America should use its status as a global superpower for moral purposes. On the domestic front, neoconservatives see a declining morality in the West and believe that this decline can and should be corrected, at some level, by the state. Brown (2006: 697) argues that the neoconservatives would prefer to use the state to "set the moral-religious compass for society, and indeed the world." Just as the political rationality of strong individualism has accompanied neoliberalism, two political rationalities are associated with the New Right and neoconservatism: masculinity and strong militaristic nationalism, respectively. For the New Right, the rationality has been a reassertion of masculinity; this has been largely in response to the "immoral" feminist and women's rights movements, which resulted in the right to an abortion with *Roe v. Wade*.

Neoconservatives are concerned both about the United States being perceived as weak in response to non-democratic states and also about the nation-state's loss of power and influence to what they see as soft multilateral organizations like the United Nations. Therefore, they have asserted and supported a strong nationalism, bolstered by militarism when needed, to advance and strengthen the nation-state. Ironically, with its emphasis on deregulation and its promotion of free trade between nations, the neoliberal economic agenda strengthens international organizations and promotes multi-national business, thus undermining the neoconservative plan to strengthen the nation-state. How neoconservatives and the New Right were courted by the neoliberals, how these movements worked together in spite of their contradictions, how they rose to prominence, and how they rallied support for their corresponding public ideologies (masculinity, militarism, and nationalism) are outlined below.

Religious Revival and the Celebration of Masculinity

It is important to recognize that evangelical Christians generally have a different relationship to dominant culture than other religious groups in the United States. Mainline Protestants (Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, etc.) traditionally have felt neither at odds with traditional culture nor embattled with it, and they have been perceived and perceive themselves as supportive of the status quo. Fundamentalist Christians, unlike evangelicals, tend to be neither engaged nor embattled with culture, preferring sectarianism and seclusion, as they view culture as “wicked” and beyond redemption. While Falwell and his followers may have been considered fundamentalist to the extent that they believed in a literal reading and interpretation of the Bible, they differed from traditional fundamentalists in their willingness to engage with the broader culture in order to change it. Smith (1998) explains that there is an attractive external component to evangelical theology that encourages believers to participate in “engaged orthodoxy,” which asks followers to commit to traditional church teachings while confronting the social problems of the corrupt dominant culture. The New Right, therefore, consists mostly of Christians, who despite their fundamentalist leanings, found it necessary to engage themselves in the political sphere.

According to Hardisty (1999: 42), the popularity of the New Right came from the anxiety its members felt and continue to feel over losing control of a society that is characterized by rapid social and economic changes, most of which can be traced to the implementation of the neoliberal economic agenda. Historically, Hardisty argues, political shifts to the right have meant increased support for the status quo, and have included respect for limited government, reverence for the church, bolstering the nuclear family, and adherence to free-market principles. The New Right, however, at its founding was more ideologically extreme than its historical predecessor, the Old Right. In response to cultural changes, the New Right, while holding on to its support for the nuclear family and free market principles, was and continues to be extremely suspicious of the government, asks for an increased role in policing individual sexual practices, and dismisses mainstream Protestantism (Hardisty 1999). The popularity of the New Right is evidenced by the fact that Mainline Protestant churches, those that were seen as supporting the status quo, lost many of their more conservative members in the 1960s and have continued to lose members today.

When the New Right emerged in the late 1970s as an organized political movement, it promoted itself as a coalition of Bible-believing individuals and organizations who organized an attack on abortion rights, pornography, homosexuality and feminism (Hardisty 1999: 17). As the organization was fiercely anti-feminist, one of the most important issues for the coalition became overturning the 1973 Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion. The New Right not only gave a voice to the frustration and discontent that many citizens felt but also gave them a place where they could act on that frustration (Hardisty 1999: 17). Today, non-denominational, evangelical mega-churches, places that serve as spiritual homes to conservative evangelical Christians, are among the fastest growing religious organizations in the United States (Johnson et al. 1993). In terms of their commitment to political engagement, these churches and the para-church organizations that help support them and organize their members are the heir to the New Right.

Hardisty (1999: 70-71) argues that from the beginning, a central theme of the New Right's backlash politics has been opposition to the feminist movement. She argues that with its emphasis on "traditional values," conservatives in general and the New Right in particular have "tapped into the public's mixed feelings about recent changes in the role of women, and in the process, organized political opposition to feminist reforms" (Hardisty 1999: 71). According to Hardisty (1999: 71), right-wing women leaders paint feminists as threatening the family and "promoting" abortion, divorce, lesbianism, and the sexual revolution. Today, there are several organizations that capitalize on the legacy of the Moral Majority by furthering the anti-feminist movement. Ironically, many of these organizations are led by women, such as Phyllis Schafley, leader of the extreme right wing Eagle Forum, and Beverly LaHaye, founder of the more religious Concerned Women for America.

Anti-feminist messages appeal to those on the right for a couple of reasons. First, for those who subscribe to a literalist conservative interpretation of the Bible, "an infallible mandate" for how to live life, women are inferior to men (Hardisty 1999: 85). Therefore, feminism, which at its heart believes that women are equal to men, upsets the

God-given order of the universe. For those on the right who are more secular in outlook, a march toward feminism may be seen as advancing the nation toward socialism. In a traditional conservative worldview, behavior is guided by the long-held Anglo-European principles of individualism, Christianity, and self-restraint. When gender roles are questioned or reversed, this is seen as leading to chaos. Indeed, some women see feminist principles as “leaving women insecure in a menacing world” that has high social costs (Hardisty 1999: 85).

One movement that reinforced anti-feminist rhetoric was the Promise Keepers organization, established in 1990 to encourage men to be good providers to their families and faithful to their wives. In other words, men were asked to commit to a traditional model of family relations and to work for one type of “stability, security, and predictability in an uncertain world” (Hardisty 1999: 86). When men attended a rally, they were asked to become born-again, if they were not already, commit to responsibility toward their families, and be guided by a literal reading of the Bible. This movement, in the tradition of the New Right, is hostile toward traditional Protestantism and claims that true Christianity can best be found in independent, fundamentalist churches (Hardisty 1999: 93). The rationality embedded in the anti-feminist movement is the privileging of men and the masculine over women and the feminine.

While the anti-feminist backlash many be rooted in religiously conservative movements, it is not strictly religious. Hardisty (1999: 90) points to another group of conservative women, neoliberal in their orientation, who, with an “almost religious belief in the free market,” trust it to protect and promote them. They are libertarian in their support of self-reliance, free-market capitalism, and, by extension, the dismantling of the welfare state that they view as supporting and promoting single motherhood. These feminists, who disturb Hardisty in their unwillingness to acknowledge the assistance they have been given by the women's movement, are likely to celebrate women who exhibit such qualities as aggressiveness, maliciousness, violence, deceitfulness, and oppressiveness, some of the most negative qualities associated with men. Working in tandem with the political rationality of individualism, this anti-feminism morphs into a self-reliant strain of masculinity that finds cross-over appeal among conservative groups.

In addition to supporting the neoliberal ideal of destroying government assistance programs, this emphasis on self-reliant masculinity has transformed how Jesus, the central figure of Christianity, is viewed among conservative believers. Recall from the introduction Prothero's (2004) assertion that American Protestantism has been based on Jesus-loving rather than God-fearing, an image reinforced by the popular portrait of Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ," a head-and-shoulders portrait of Jesus "radiating peace and serenity. . .while gazing lovingly at us" (*The Wall Street Journal* 2004: W19). Alongside changes in the social and economic milieu, changes have taken place in Christianity. As discussed above, evangelical Christians have a different relationship with the dominant culture than do fundamentalist or mainline Christians. Rather than withdrawing from the culture as fundamentalists are wont to do, or existing in tandem with the culture, as has been the case with mainline Protestants, evangelical Christians seek to engage with culture and, through doing so, promote social change. Just as Christianity has changed, Jesus has changed as well. The Jesus that Gibson gives viewers is more like the vengeful God of the Old Testament rather than the peaceful radical of the New Testament portrayed in films from the early 1970s such as *Godspell* (1970) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). In *The Passion of the Christ*, we find a Jesus who has undergone a great transformation from a friendly, feminized companion to a neoliberal masculine individual who is alive and active and who uses militarism as his main tool to promote social change.

The image of a self-reliant Jesus is a product of the New Right's long-lasting impact, made possible by its painting itself a victim of an unsympathetic liberal media. Victimization, intertwined with individualism, nationalism, and masculinity serve as strong political rationalities as well as organizing principles for the right. It is not a coincidence that for the majority of the film, the Jesus of *The Passion* is victimized by groups of Jewish priests and soldiers and by Roman temple guards, all seemingly under the independent feminine presence of Satan, an aspect of the film that will be discussed in chapter four. This perception of victimization has been fueled and perpetuated in part by the vast grass-roots organizing and fundraising networks that it put in place to sustain itself after Ronald Reagan (the successful public face of the right and minister of the marriage between neoliberalism, the New Right, and neoconservatism) left office (Edwards 1999). According to Hardisty (1999: 47), this infrastructure includes think tanks, media outlets, law firms, publications, and organizations like The Heritage Foundation, Concerned Women for America, The Eagle Forum, and Focus on the Family. In addition, the New Right has been personally connecting with its members through various forms of media, beginning with direct mail in the 1970s (Hardisty 1999:

45), a method that has helped them gain momentum and organize against their common enemy: the mainstream media, vilified as liberal and biased against conservative and religious points of view.   In response, new media outlets like Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network were created. This served as a rallying point for like-minded viewers and a way to raise awareness of right-wing issues, including reports on Gibson's film before, when, and after it was released. These religious groups also made effective use of mailing videos and DVDs to the homes of members, as well as broadcasting their message and connecting members through the Internet and World Wide Web (Hardisty 1999: 46).

For neoconservatives and members of the Religious Right, the major problem of the modern era is the same: the United States has lost its place as the global economic and social leader, or hegemon, and its support for the welfare state is seen as exacerbating the situation. Further, those on the right perceive that their efforts to strengthen the United States economically, socially, and morally by rolling back the benefits of the welfare state have been vilified by an unsympathetic mainstream media. For the U.S. to regain its former position as global leader, the right believes, there must be a new era of reforms, one that essentially restores masculinity to the country and in which we find a model in Gibson's individualistic militant Jesus. Ehrenreich (2002) argues that "war – that most violent and decisive of human acts – is the paradigmatic masculine enterprise" and goes further to note that war makes *nations* (author's emphasis) masculine, too. There is also an element of race and gender in this nationalism, as Ehrenreich contends that "the image of the *enemy* that occupies the national psyche (and often animates the

American film industry) is both non-white and feminized." The restoration of masculinity to the United States, while bolstered in large part by neoliberalism and the New Right, was actually ushered in by the events the occurred on September 11, 2001, and the neoconservative agenda that was put in place to respond to the attacks.

Neoconservative Nationalism

In addition to courting the Religious Right, neoliberal leaders developed ties to a group of well-financed neoconservative intellectuals who, like the New Right, spoke publicly about a return to a more civil and traditional place and time (Harvey 2005: 49-50). Under the internal policy of "fusionism," the right was able to join doctrines of anti-liberalism, the pet project of the New Right, free market anti-governmentalism, the focus of neoliberals, and anticommunism, the primary concern of the neoconservatives. The three movements accomplished this by emphasizing their commonalities, a strategy spearheaded by right-wing intellectual William F. Buckley. This enabled neoliberals to widen their base of support and advance their agenda by combining their economic goals with the moral and military goals of the other two movements.

Like neoliberalism, neoconservatism is not a political movement but rather an intellectual persuasion or orientation whose ideas have influenced policy recommendations and government actions (Kristol 1995; Stelzer 2004a; Weinstein 2004). Karaagac (2000: 49-50) explains that neoconservatism, like most intellectual political trends, began as a loose coalition of thought defined against, rather than for, specific ideas and policies. In his book, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Irving Kristol (1995: 30), considered by many to be the founder or at least "grandfather" of the neoconservative movement, tells of his own journey from a leftist Trotskyite to a neoconservative. In fact, many early neoconservatives were Democrats who wanted to distance themselves from the George McGovern-Eugene McCarthy wing of their party, preserving the idea of social liberalism while continuing an active American interventionism abroad. Others, like Kristol, whose early concentration in the movement focused on foreign policy, found Ronald Regan a more compelling choice to stand up to the Soviets than Jimmy Carter (Karaagac 2000: 49-50).

What first brought together the neoconservatives and solidified their identities as neoconservatives were their reactions against the student rebellions and countercultural movements of the late 1960s (I. Kristol 1995: 31). While the neoconservative school of thought was actually in existence earlier, the term "neoconservatism" came into use in the mid-1970s specifically to describe two groups of people who were disillusioned with the United States' government policy: those were critical of President Lyndon Johnson's New Deal and those concerned about the weakened position of the United States in relation to the Soviet Union after the United States' defeat in the Vietnam conflict – two realities that were viewed as resulting from the anti-authority ethos of the countercultural movement of the 1960s (Muravchik 2004: 244). The latter warrants discussion here, and the former will be dealt with in the discussion of the dismantling of the welfare state as one of the lasting legacies of right-wing fusionism.

While Kristol offered neoconservative ideas on the domestic policy front, he initially came to the movement in protest of American foreign policy decisions and the government's commitment to multilateral organizations like the United Nations, especially in the wake of the independence movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Jeanne Kirkpatrick (2004: 237) explains that initially the UN was designed to operate as an “idealistic internationalist version of liberal democracy” where new political voices were heard and new coalitions developed, an example of which was the formation of the movement of non-aligned nations, founded in April 1955. These nations did not formally ally with the capitalist nations of the West or the communist nations under the leadership of the Soviet Union. This formation bothered neoconservatives, as some member countries, like Cuba, were indeed surreptitiously aligned and troublingly so with the non-democratic Soviet Union. The fact that the U.S. continued to be committed to the United Nations was viewed as the government being light on communism. Frustrations continued to mount in neoconservative circles and crested in the wake of America’s withdraw from Vietnam in the mid-1970s. Neoconservatives wanted to maintain a presence in the Southeast Asian country in order to take a moral stand in support of democracy and against dictatorship, especially totalitarianism. Those who wanted the United States to withdraw from Vietnam were seen by neoconservatives as indifferent to communism (J. Kirkpatrick 2004). In many ways, communism served as the perfect enemy for the right, as it essentially stood against the central tenets of the three movements encompassed by the right. Planned economies flew in the face of free-market imperatives, just as anti-democratic governments and a secular, purposefully godless state were in direct opposition to neoconservatism and the Religious Right, respectively.

Jeanne Kirkpatrick (2004: 239), a neoconservative author, connects the popularity of the same anti-authority movements of the 1960s, against which the backlash of the

Religious Right took place, as undermining the moral and political authority of the United States. She writes that the case for not having a troop presence in Vietnam focused less on the idea that the war was unwise or unnecessary and more on the idea that the United States "was immoral – a 'sick society' guilty of racism, materialism, imperialism, and murder of Third World people in Vietnam." In response, neoconservatives articulated a foreign policy that would free the United States from its multilateral commitments and instead rely on unilateral action and many different tools of diplomacy (including force) to address humanitarian concerns as well as protect and promote liberal democracy. At the heart of the movement was the idea that as the world's most powerful liberal democracy, the United States is obligated to act unilaterally as a global leader to advance humanitarian concerns and promote democracy (Wolfson 2004: 227; Boot 2004: 49). Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (2004: 103) sums up the foundation of this belief: "the West – above all perhaps, the English-speaking peoples of the West – has formed that system of liberal democracy which is politically dominant and which we all know offers the best hope of global peace and prosperity." However, this political ideology was not popular among all on the right and would not gain wide-spread support until after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when a strategy, similar to the one proposed by the Project for the New American Century in their 90-page report entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategies, Forces, and Resources For a New Century* (2000), was implemented under the guidance of the George W. Bush administration.

The key to advancing the Western-dominant ideology advocated by neoconservatism is making the United States the strongest presence in a global political climate, which calls for support of multinational and supranational institutions, in some cases at the expense of the nation-states (Will 2004: 129). The views of conservative author George Will (2004: 135) are representative of the neoconservative way of thinking, one that sees little benefit to U.S. participation in international institutions, viewing them as "essentially unaccountable and unrepresentative." However, opting out of the multilateral arena has become especially challenging with the establishment of the European Union, a supra-state organization under which many nation-states gave up their sovereignty to be part of a larger, collective unit (Will 2004: 132). For neoconservatives, this provides even further motivation for pursuing an agenda based on developing a strong military and on using unilateral power. Kagan (2004) contends that multilateralism is detrimental to the United States, as Europe, a weaker militarily power, uses multilateralism to undermine and control the United States. With the United States victimized by terrorists on September 11, 2001, and the political rationality of individualism dominant in the national zeitgeist, it is not difficult to see how a military policy that centers on "going it alone" would gain national support.

While neoconservatism was considered by neoliberal leaders to be an integral strategic part of the right, many neoconservative thinkers felt that their ideas were not taken seriously until after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Proof of this was seen in U.S. policy toward the Balkans where the United States would not commit to full involvement in the region. This was largely the case because Presidents George Bush senior and Bill Clinton did not see the United States possessing a strategic interest in the region.   So disappointed were many neoconservatives with the reception their policy recommendations had received that, in March 1996, Norman Podhoretz wrote an essay in *Commentary* magazine declaring the movement dead. In fact, it was only after the attacks of September 11 that many neoconservative thinkers and writers witnessed neoconservatism becoming popular again, when, they contend, it was revealed that the world was more dangerous than previously thought (Muravchik 2004: 256; W. Kristol 2004: 75). Muravchik (2004: 256) argues that neoconservatism gained popularity after September 11, 2001, because it not only had already articulated one of the few coherent analyses for what had gone wrong, but also had proposed ideas for what to do in response, including waging war against terrorist organizations and the governments supporting them. For example, in her analysis of the global political threats in 1996, five years before the attacks, Margaret Thatcher (2004: 94-95) praised the fall of the Soviet Union, but acknowledged that the dismantling of the Soviet regime led to the emergence of new global threats, including secular Islamic rule. These new governments, she posited, would give rise to radical Islamic regimes that would undermine secular Arab governments aligned with the West. Because of the immediate threat that Islamic terrorists seemed to pose to the United States in fall 2001, the government's emphasis on containment and political realism were considered by neoconservatives a less effective strategy than one of regime change and democracy promotion. These two core tenets of neoconservative foreign policy both were used by President Bush to justify the March 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Muslim fundamentalism, Fukuyama (in Kagan 2004: 81) notes, does not present the same threat or serious challenge to the principles of Western liberalism as did communism. Therefore, while fundamentalism requires a response, it does not require the same united, coherent front from all Western capitalist countries that communism did giving the United States a stronger justification for pursuing a unilateral foreign policy. Additionally, because of its weakened military position, neoconservative author Kagan (2004: 33) argues, Europe is less likely to see a threat where the United States does. For example, while rogue states pose a threat to Europe and the United States, they are likely pose a hazard to the latter as the U.S. is the bigger, more powerful target. In fact, this rogue state justification provided validation for the United States invading Iraq without the consensus support of the international community. According to Kagan (2004), because the United States has the ability and responsibility to act as a global leader, US foreign policy must become comfortable adhering to double standards. For example, while advocating arms control for other nations, it must not adhere to arms control itself.

Neoconservatives were not able to advance their anti-communist agenda in the mid-1970s due in large part to a lack of public support in the United States stemming from the view as Jeanne Kirkpatrick (2004) points out, that the United States was an immoral nation. Given this historical context, neoconservatives, perhaps more than any other group on the right, understand the necessity for and power of generating support for their agenda. W. Kristol and Kagan (2004: 73) contend that nationalism should be used to spread democracy beyond our borders, as the United States is the best equipped nation for the job of democracy promotion since “its foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality.” The U.S. does not even need to have an enemy to play a strong and active role in the world, they argue. Even if there were not an active threat, they contend, "it would not absolve us of the responsibilities that fate has placed on our shoulders" (Kristol and Kagan 2004: 73). The sense that a power bigger than us has placed an awesome and inescapable responsibility on the United States infuses nationalism with a sense of urgency. This agenda has become even more imperative as the United States' global superpower status continues to diminish.

Nationalism, like religious fundamentalism, argues Castells (1997: 65), is a defensive reaction to social change. As the world seems larger and less under the control of the individual, as has come to be the case under neoliberal economic policy, fundamentalists and nationalists have a tendency to shrink the world "back to their size and reach." The nation, Castells argues, is not the same as the state with its formal bureaucracies and institutions, but rather is an "imagined community" embedded in cultural constructs, political projects, and above all a shared history. National greatness for the United States, argues Kagan (2004: 86-87), has been "an integral part of the national identity, inextricably intertwined with national ideology." There is little question, Kagan (2004) argues, that the interests of the United States and the rest of the world are making U.S. foreign policy inherently and historically internationalist. While Europe has understandably had negative experiences with nationalism when it was connected with the rise of fascism during World War II, this has not been the case with the United States and therefore, Will contends, nationalism can and should be used as a positive tool to promote good in the world, especially when it comes to rallying support for self-government in other countries. Will (2004: 136) is careful to point out that

American political arrangements are not suited to everybody – at least not currently. However, he contends, they are suited to culturally superior people, or those who are up to the demands of self-government, which he views as a human right.

The nationalism that marked the early 2000s, the time when *The Passion of the Christ* was written, made, marketed, and released, was not a proactive nationalism oriented toward the construction or defense of the domestic state, but rather was reactive, defending "an already institutionalized culture" based largely on reinforcing the already extant political rationalities. This incarnation of nationalism, buttressed primarily by a militarily mighty, masculine, "go-it-alone" individualist United States' defense policy, was able to legitimate the right's agenda. Therefore, in addition to implementing neoconservative pro-democracy initiatives, this time period saw neoliberal free market reforms as well as the promotion of the New Right's agenda, including the opening of the office of faith-based initiatives and the ban on conducting research with amniotic stem cells. While cultivating strong support for the United States was primarily the project of neoconservatism, it received a boost from American evangelical Christianity and further solidified the power of the right in the United States.

Balmer (2000) and Smith (2000) explain that, while evangelicals should not be seen as a homogenous group, one commonly held belief among them is America's place as a "Christian Nation." While not all evangelicals view the history or the present state of the country in the same way, for evangelicals generally, there is an urgent need to reform or present an alternative to traditional culture, and they have attempted to implement their agenda by strengthening a pro-Christian nationalism. While the New

Right and neoliberals might share the desire for a strong America independent of foreign influence, they have different ideas of what a reformed America would look like. For neoliberals, the state will not necessarily be religious in its character but will assert its power to do good in the world. The New Right, at its most extreme, would like to see the church and state have a close, almost theocracy-like relationship. At a lesser extreme, the New Right engages in "Reclaiming America for Christ," as is promoted at an annual conference held at the nationally recognized Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The Success of Fusionism

The "fusionist" strategy of the right—combining the three groups under the umbrella of the Republican party—was masterful in that it seemed to benefit all branches of the movement. Those on the New Right were able to find politicians to convey their message to the broader public even if they did not successfully implement many of their agenda items, including their lynchpin, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Neoconservatives benefited in the same way, gaining some representation in the halls of power, even if their foreign and domestic policy initiatives were not fully implemented. The biggest winner of the three was neoliberalism. By connecting, in the same party platform, concerns about weak foreign policy and declining morality with pro-business directives and initiatives, when legislation concerning morality was placed on ballots, voters would turn out in droves to support candidates who they thought best represented their interests on the issues. However, what often resulted was the advancement of the corporate agenda with little advancement of "values" legislation.

Writing about the Republican Party in 2004, Frank observed that the leaders of the Republican Party were able to maintain their position of power and prominence because they intentionally downplayed the politics of economics while mobilizing voters on a number of explosive social issues such as gay marriage, prayer in schools, busing, and displays of perceived un-Christian art. Complementing the social-over-economic approach was the right's strategy of painting conservative religious and moral beliefs as under siege, the victims of liberalism (Frank 2004). Frank sees a pattern in the fusionist approach, noting that while moral values are addressed during election campaigns, they are rarely acted on while elected officials are in office. Rather, attention is focused on protecting business by working toward lowering wages, increasing corporate taxes cuts, and implementing minimal regulations on work places (Frank 2004). Like Hardisty, Frank observes that by voting pro-business officials into office, a so-called working-class movement has done "incalculable, historic harm to working-class people" and has effectively turned attention away from the harmful consequences of capitalism and corporate power. Harvey (2005: 50) writes, "Not for the first time, nor is it to be feared, for the last time in history has a social group been persuaded to vote against its material, economic or class interest for cultural, nationalist and religious reasons." One of the greatest casualties – or, for those on the right, victories – of this strategy has been the weakening of the welfare state.

Dismantling the Welfare State

While neoliberalism, the New Right, and neoconservatives differ in how their agendas originated, one goal that they all share is stopping the growth of the welfare state. The primary fear for neoliberals is that big government will limit choice, thereby compromising personal liberty and in turn the general welfare of society. Neoconservatives, on the other hand, do not object to big government, seeing it as an inherent outgrowth of democracy and are generally supportive of social security programs as long as they are solvent and economically-sound. Their concerns about welfare programs place them more with the New Right, and have to do with the moral health of society. This distress is summed up by Irving Kristol’s (2004: 146) estimation that the current welfare system hurts the people it is meant to help by breeding crime, juvenile delinquency, illegitimacy, drug addiction, alcoholism, and “the destruction of the once functioning public school system.” This critique, unsurprisingly, grew out of the troubles both the neoconservatives and the New Right saw as emerging from the socially permissive zeitgeist of the 1960s. As mentioned above, for the New Right, one specific threat was feminism and movements for gender equality; thus, at the center of the New Right’s agenda were initiatives to support and strengthen the nuclear family. In their view, the welfare state was seen as replacing the family, and more specifically the father, as the primary provider of economic well-being. The New Right also viewed welfare as the source of a number of social problems, including fathers abandoning families, boys turning to crime, and girls becoming teenage mothers (Hoggart 2005: 150). Similar to the neoconservatives, the New Right touted the importance of traditional families and a strict division of sexual labor, where women would return to the home to be responsible for the care and welfare of children (Hoggart 2005: 151). The discourse of the right was at the same time a call to bolster the traditional family and a racist attack on minorities whom politicians, party leaders, and citizens on the right came to view as the primary group advantaged by the state's services.

Hoggart (2005: 150) argues the New Right was not on the fringes of political discourse, but rather played a key role in implementing neoliberal policies through its attack on the Keynesian welfare settlement. Members of the New Right were further motivated by the belief that economic stagnation operated in tandem with the moral compromising of the nation, viewing government care as stifling individual initiative and suppressing personal responsibility (Hoggart 2005: 150). Hoggart further argues that with the right's perceiving that moral decline precedes economic decline, when difficult economic conditions prevail, the right appeared to be validated.

Since the late 1970s, the implementation of neoliberal policies has resulted in sweeping economic changes, including "the elimination of many industrial-sector jobs, the growth of lower-wage service jobs, the redistribution of wealth upwards, an accompanying increase in the gap between rich and poor, and the restructuring of the national economy to be more interdependent with the global economy" (Hardisty 1999: 24). Hardisty goes on to explain that the economic hardship experienced by many working- and middle-class affects their political thinking. Hoggart (2005: 150) agrees, noting specifically that under the neoliberal regime, "(i)deologies of collectivism and social responsibility gave way as the citizen became the consumer." The consequence of privileging oneself as a consumer over a citizen is that economic concerns are privileged at the expense of political concerns, a shift in thinking that has greatly benefited the privileged classes in the United States at the expense of those in the working and middle classes. However, through ideas perpetuated by the New Right and to some extent the neoconservatives, the blame for the economic woes of the individuals and the country are not placed on those who make economic policies but rather on those seen as compromising the nation morally. Indeed, the "moralists" on the right blame those on the left for over-taxing, or "robbing," the average person. The right then creates scapegoats out of welfare mothers, immigrants, poor Blacks, and other people of color deemed unworthy of receiving tax dollars. Consequently, the poor are blamed for siphoning money from hardworking taxpayers and compromising the economy and, as a result, the greatness of the United States.

SLOUCHING TOWARD FASCISM: THE LEGACY OF THE NEOLIBERAL REVOLUTION

In his chapter "Rational Fascism," Michael Parenti makes the point that historians, politicians, and many thinkers today mistakenly conflate fascism and communism as systems that are committed to government ownership and control of business. Parenti (1997: 8) asserts that "fascism is misrepresented as a mutant form of socialism." He argues that "if fascism means anything, it means all-out government support for business and severe repression of anti-business, prolabor [sic] forces." If this does not describe the United States now, it describes the path that the country is on with the neoliberal agenda leading the way. Polyani argues vehemently against committing what he calls the "economistic fallacy" whereby we base our analyses of social and governmental relations on the market. He notes that we should view the transformation of nation-states into fascist ones as resulting from markets that refused to function, a transformation which is not economic, but social, in nature. However, because economic activity is social activity, we should view it as one and the same. Polyani (1944: 248) understandably argues that when governments are fascist, the philosophies that underlie them radiate “into almost every field of human activity whether political or economic, cultural, philosophic, artistic, or religious.”

Goldfrank (1990: 90) clarifies that Polyani “understands fascism as a perverse and opportunistic twisting of the social impulse to control the chaos of a capitalist world” and that its success can be attributed to “the collapse of the world’s regulative institutions.” At the conclusion of his essay, Goldfrank (1990: 92) argues that we can see governments that are reminiscent of historical fascist regimes, but relegates his examples to governments that exist in the second and third world. He proposes that if another fascist catastrophe is to be averted, we must put our faith in regulatory institutions that will work and exist after the current phase of U.S. hegemony is over. While Goldfrank does not specify which regulative agencies we are to trust, we could take him to means the IMF, the World Bank, the two former regulators of the global economy, or the various trade agreement organizations that exist between countries. Perhaps Goldfrank makes a mistake in thinking that these regulatory agencies have the interests of the individual at heart, rather than those of corporations. As discussed above, in their current incarnations, they do not.

While the current democratic-capitalist system in the United States both supports and promotes social and economic inequality, this is very rarely challenged and requests for change are infrequently levied against the system. Given the influence of the strands of thinking highlighted above, including the defense of the free market and criticism of the welfare state, one can understand why. To more clearly appreciate the relationship between the government and the governed, it is helpful to look toward theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971: 227), who explains that the state should be viewed not as an impartial bureaucratic body, but rather as one intimately connected with upper (or ruling) class interests. In his description of the relationship of the ruling class to the political apparatus of the states, he notes that “classes produce parties, and parties form the personnel of state and government, the leaders of civil and political society.” Under neoliberalism, Harvey (2005: 33) argues, CEOs have become a substantial core of class power, and since they have been allowed to amass small fortunes, they have the ability of exercise control over the political process (Harvey 2005: 34).

These political interests include managing the permanent bureaucratic state apparatus, as well as holding office in the state government or supporting candidates for office who will pass laws in their favor. For Gramsci, class interests extend beyond the government to civil society, or the realm that exists between the state and the private sphere. Importantly, this includes the economic realm. Gramsci (1971: 242) argues that the aim of the state today is to create “new and higher forms of civilization.” Advancing civilization, though, is no longer associated with the protection of all human beings and the advancement of human rights, the post-Enlightenment state-building project. Rather, in our modern world, the advancement of civilization has come to be equated with “developing the economic apparatus of production.” Consequently, all other goals fall behind this one.

Unfortunately, as pointed out above, the economic goals of neoliberalism have resulted in a sense of economic insecurity for most people in the United States. Campbell (2005) writes that, with its endorsement of neoliberalism, the United States government has essentially supported an attack on labor that has weakened the ability of workers to fight back against management, lowered the real value of the minimum wage, interpreted labor laws to favor management, legally busted unions, and weakened the social safety net. Dumenil and Levy (2005) concur, noting that neoliberal economic policies have benefited shareholders at the expense of laborers, diminished the role the state plays concerning welfare, and led to dramatic growth in the financial sector, which has allowed for an unprecedented increase in finance capital. Additionally, economic insecurity is no longer exclusively the problem of the working class. These authors go on to point out that these policies have increased wealth for the upper fraction of the owners of capital as expressed in securities, shares, and bonds. Further, with the deregulation and growth of the finance industry, those in the upper middle classes came to possess these same wealth-producing holdings as the upper classes. For many in the middle class, their pension funds have been bound up in these financial assets, giving them the impression that they are rich, or are members of the capitalist class. While this strategy seemed sound at the end of the 1990s, when portfolios were gaining strength, this was not the case in the early and mid-twentieth century, with weakened financial portfolios threatening the possibility of retiring to a decent quality of life (Dumenil and Levy 2005: 14).

The economic restructuring that has resulted from the neoliberal policies of late capitalism have had a negative effect on large numbers of working- and middle-class people, causing resentfulness and insecurity and in some unresolved social-psychological crises since these people have no control over the solutions to their hardships. As discussed above, with the crisis of the welfare state, these individuals are more likely to see the government as the cause of their economic malaise than a solution to their problems. This mentality in turn works to strengthen support for neoliberal policies that ask for less government intervention in business policies and practices.

In analyzing the current political and economic situation in the United States, Palley (2005: 27) points out that even when market failure takes place, the remedy, government intervention, has been demonized to the point of being called government failure. When the government intervenes, these actions are viewed as the implementation of inefficient bureaucracies at the expense of market-style incentives, which have not only been upheld as the most effective way to allocate societal resources, but also to protect human freedom. The "government failure" argument, Palley (2005: 27) contends, resonates with the culture of radical individualism that is a natural outgrowth of both neoliberal thought as well as the New Right's deep suspicion of the government. With this attack on the government, we see the freedoms of capitalism, which translate to limited government intervention, becoming conflated with freedom of democracy, the system of government that celebrates the sovereignty of the individual and his or her participation in government (Munck 2005: 65). In other words, under neoliberal democracy, the citizen should be protected from the government and free to accumulate wealth and to consume.

This set of economic and social circumstances has not appeared by accident, but rather has been purposefully engineered. George (1999: 2) argues that the current relationship between culture and economy has been deliberately negotiated, and he contends that the neo-liberals have “bought and paid for their own vicious and regressive economic transformation.” George (1999), who laments that neoliberals have understood better than progressive thinkers the advantages of cultural hegemony, is worth quoting at length:

> They [neoliberals] have spent absolutely hundreds of millions of dollars, but the result has been worth every penny to them because they have made neo-liberalism seem as if it were the natural and normal condition of humankind. No matter how many disasters of all kinds the neo-liberal system has visibly created, no matter what financial crisis it may engender, no matter how many losers and outcasts it may create, it is still made to seem inevitable, like an act of God, the only possible economic and social order available to us. (P. 3)

Also useful in advancing the neoliberal agenda is the fact that the concept of social class has been transformed. Brown (2006: 693) points out that under the neoliberal regime, social class has been depoliticized and citizens are given “the equal right to inequality.” This does not mean that social class has disappeared altogether. It still exists but has taken on a decidedly un-economic tone (Frank 2004: 115). Rather than define class in terms of where one works or how much income one earns, Frank observes that what makes one a member of the noble proletariat today is whether or not one is “authentic” – measurements of which include where one works and prays, and what one drives. This “authenticity” is defined in opposition to the notion of the “eastern establishment” or the “liberal elite,” markers that have economic undertones but are decidedly cultural. These markers of organization have been highly effective in terms of creating group identity, but have not been effective in addressing group members' economic concerns.

Frank (2004: 5), characterizes the last forty years as a “great backlash,” arguing that social issues and cultural issues have now been given more weight than economic issues as matters of public concern (Frank 2004: 5). By focusing on issues of moral and cultural concern, such as abortion, prayer in schools, displaying the Ten Commandments on government property, even the mainstream media's overall negative response to *The Passion of the Christ*, conservatives have either masked or downplayed economic problems. This is not to say that the entire Republican Party has shifted to this approach, but rather this has led to a marked divide between conservatives and moderates within the Republican Party. With the election of George Bush in 2000 and again in 2004, the conservatives, and the economic elite in the business class at least at those moments, were winning.

In outlining the economic and cultural changes that have specifically taken place in the state of Kansas, Frank (2004: 74) argues that the conservative Republican delegation (specifically Representative Jim Ryun, Representative Todd Tiahrt, and Senator Sam Brownback) elected to the U.S. House and Senate, along with the Kansas Republican party, have done an artful job of mixing capitalism and the culture war by throwing their support toward the moral issues mentioned above while furthering liberalizing economic reforms. These reforms include a flat tax or national sales tax to replace the current graduated income tax, abolishing the capital gains tax, doing away with the estate tax, privatizing Social Security, and guaranteeing that there is no government intervention in health care. Frank notes that while his analysis focused on Kansas, the morally conservative /economically liberal marriage was taking place across America.

Capitalizing on Victimhood

Frank (2004: 119) argues that the right today has capitalized on "the doctrine of the oppressed majority" and notes that when they speak of themselves, "they [conservatives] are always the underdog, always in rebellion against a haughty establishment, always rising from below." This, of course, advances the feeling of victimhood in spite of the fact that at the time *The Passion of the Christ* was released, Republicans controlled the majority in both houses of the U.S. Congress and held the Presidency, and made the majority of Supreme Court appointments by 2006. The nebulous figure of the "liberal" enemy who acts in ways that disadvantage people with strong religious beliefs has powerful implications. Frank (2004) argues that this rhetorical move is not accidental. He writes:

> (T)o believe that liberalism is all-powerful gets conservative lawmakers off the hook for their flagrant failure to make headway in the culture wars, but it also makes for a singularly negative and depressing movement culture. To be a populist conservative is to be a fatalist; to believe in a world where your side will never win; indeed, where your side by definition *cannot* win. When even the most shattering electoral victories turn out to be hollow, the liberal stranglehold on life can never be broken. (P. 125)

Indeed, the stance of "victim" has been particularly powerful for the Republican Party, especially when the ideas of neoconservatives and the New Right are painted as coming under attack from forces both foreign and domestic. These illustrations of victimhood are illustrated in the major addresses to the nation given by President Bush (2001: 2), the figurehead of the conservative branch of the Republican Party. "Compassion," Bush explained in his first inaugural address (2001: 2), "is the great work of the nation, not just government." He goes on to explain: "some needs and hurts are so deep they will only respond to a mentor's touch or a pastor's prayer. Church and charity, synagogue and mosque lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honored place in our plans and in our laws." This statement implies that the religious community has not been supported by government. By stating that they *will* have an honored place in our laws, Bush argues that they have *not had* an honored place in the past and will be sustained so that they can do their healing work with the support of his administration. Therefore, religion was depicted as an arena under attack by the government itself.

In his September 20, 2001, address to the nation, Bush (2001: 2) describes the September the 11th highjackers as "a fringe form of Islamic extremism" that is "rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics." With this explanation, Bush distances traditional Islam from the religious beliefs of the group that attacked America. Bush further describes the activities of the members of this group as having a directive "that commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and to make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children." With this statement, the President sets out a hierarchy of vulnerability. The President indicates that the nation itself was a victim and that as Americans, we were all automatically targets for potential attack. Additionally, citizens that claim Judaism or Christianity as their religion are even more susceptible to attack. In his above description of the terrorists' mission, President Bush implies that the American citizenry and, more importantly, the religious beliefs that guide their lives and ethos – Christianity and Judaism – are under attack, not just from its domestic government, but from foreign invaders as well.

Over halfway through the 2004 State of the Union address, President Bush (2004: 6) begins a section on domestic policy initiatives with the phrase, "We are living in a time of great change – in our world, our economy, in science and medicine," and he goes on to say that, while the world is changing, there are some things that endure. He lists "courage and compassion, reverence and integrity, and the respect of differences of faith and race." Bush posits that these values we live by "are instilled in us by fundamental institutions, such as families and schools, and religious congregations." He goes on to call these institutions the "unseen pillars of civilization" that must remain strong in America, and Bush vows that "we will defend them." The language of this defense again leads the listener to infer that these institutions are under attack and that Bush, as a representative for his party, will work to save them.

The victim stance is powerful, contends Zur (1994: 15-36), who outlines a typology for victims. He argues that when one sees oneself as a victim, one does not feel responsible for what has happened, is always morally right, is not accountable, is forever entitled to sympathy, and is justified in feeling moral indignation for being wronged. Therefore, if *Roe v. Wade* is not repealed, or the United States goes to war over economic (read oil) rather than humanitarian reasons, as victims, those on the right are not at fault. Rather, they transfer blame to several groups perceived as out to undermine the United States: the nebulous “liberals,” Muslim fundamentalists who pose the threat of external attack, and racialized others in the United States who have compromised the economy by taking advantage of its welfare services. The marriage of various ideologies on the right, which resonate with the political rationalities of individualism, masculinity, militarism, and nationalism, are fueled by the perception of victimhood, which have tenuously worked to keep neoliberal economic policies in place. All of the rationalities discussed above, especially victimization, resonated so strongly with those on the right and were so familiar to Mel Gibson that they helped him craft his major strategy to promote his film, as is illustrated in the next chapter, which examines the production, marketing, and distribution of *The Passion of the Christ*.

CHAPTER 3

THE MAKING AND MARKETING OF *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

INTRODUCTION

In *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson chronicled the last hours of Jesus' life on earth in a particularly violent and bloody fashion, shot the film in Aramaic, Latin, and Hebrew, and was accused by many of portraying Jewish characters in a particularly offensive manner. The linguistic complexity of the film combined with its conflicted representational politics shaped early media speculation that *The Passion* would not do well at the box office. Indeed, it seemed as if even Gibson himself was unsure whether his project would be successful. During a news conference before shooting on the film even began, Gibson said, "nobody wants to touch something filmed in two dead languages. They [Hollywood studio executives] think I'm crazy, and maybe I am. But maybe I'm a genius" (Rooney 2002b: 1). While it is neither the purpose of this chapter nor the task of this author to make judgments about Gibson's sanity or intelligence, what can be said is that in spite of the Hollywood studio system's reluctance to produce and distribute *The Passion of the Christ*, this film did far better at the box office than anyone expected. In fact, in the spring of 2004, *The Passion of the Christ* broke the record for the highest grossing "R" rated film in history.

This chapter focuses on the political and economic structure of Hollywood that facilitated the making and marketing of *The Passion of the Christ*. First, Karl Polanyi and Raymond Williams are revisited to understand the importance of considering the political and economic context in which artistic products are created. Overall, it is essential to consider that political policies and economic structures are not neutral, but aid some workers in Hollywood while harming others. Looking at Hollywood from this perspective shows the filmmaking industry as one that is not open but affords advantages and possibilities to those who have both financial means and inside connections. By considering *The Passion of the Christ* as part of a larger political economic field, we are required to see the film not only as the fruit of Gibson's personal aesthetic and religious vision, but also as a product of creative labor brought to audiences in part because of the New International Division of Cultural Labor.

The second part of this chapter focuses on how *The Passion of the Christ* was financed, produced, positioned, marketed, promoted, and distributed. A successful actor and director, Gibson is a Hollywood "insider" who used the money he had made from other film projects as well as his connections in the industry to finance and distribute his film. Gibson was able to successfully navigate and exploit the International Division of Labor, mentioned above, by filming *The Passion* primarily in Matera, Italy, and doing much of the pre- and post- production work at Rome's Cinecitta studios. In addition, Gibson employed a mostly international cast unknown to American audiences. While Gibson may have cast unknowns for aesthetic reasons, these actors were paid less overall than unionized American actors, which provided Gibson with an affordable way to complement his aesthetic sensibilities.

While Gibson was not unconventional in using his previous successes to finance a personal project or exploiting the International Division of Labor to his advantage in making the film, what is unconventional and sets *The Passion* apart from other films is how Gibson marketed and promoted his film through churches and other religious organizations. The third section of this chapter focuses on Gibson's unusual marketing techniques as well as the "free" publicity that he was able to take advantage of to promote his film. Prior to the film's release in theaters, Gibson showed previews to conservative and sympathetic media critics and not to those whom he suspected would not be supportive or sympathetic to his cause. In addition, Gibson circulated trailers for *The Passion* and held advanced screenings in evangelical mega-churches. Gibson's efforts paid off when many churches bought out showings of the movie, some before opening day. Gibson was also given "free" publicity when a war of words erupted between *The New York Times* columnist Frank Rich and him. This skirmish led to further publicity opportunities for Gibson through television appearances and interviews, many on Christian television networks and at Christian conferences. Finally, the film was distributed in movie theaters, though it was neither distributed nor marketed with the assistance of a major Hollywood studio; rather, it was marketed with the help of Newmarket Films and distributed through Icon, a studio in which Gibson is a partner. While Icon and Newmarket are in the business of marketing and distribution, they had never undertaken a project as large as *The Passion*.

Lastly, this chapter addresses another area that Gibson used to raise awareness of his film: cross-promotional marketing campaigns and merchandising. A variety of goods meant to complement the film, including pendants, nails, photographs, and books, were sold prior to the release of the film. The sale of these tangible "keepsake" goods were supplemented with promotional items, some mundane such as door hangers, and some extraordinary such as an advertisement of the film painted on the hood of a stock car at the Daytona 500. By employing a strategic formula of savvy financing, shrewd marketing, sacred positioning, swift publicity, smart merchandising and self-sufficient distribution, Gibson found a winning combination to ensure the success of his film.

The Aesthetic is Economic

In chapter one, the case was made for considering capitalism as a historically and social constructed entity, the structure of which continually involves the manipulation and changing of social policy and ideology. Recalling Block and Somers (1984: 54), we must keep in mind that markets are actually formed as a "by-product of state building strategies." When approaching issues that seem solely "economic" on the surface, for example, the business of Hollywood, one must consider that both the presence of government policies, as well as the purposeful absence of policies or actions (e.g., deregulation), form and shape an economy. We must also consider the driving force behind capitalism - labor. According to Raymond Williams (1977) we should not view the labor that goes into making works of art as a process wholly different from material or industrial production. Williams (1977: 90) argues that, traditionally, Marxists have narrowly defined what "production" means in the capitalist economic system, and that for these theorists, "'material production' is a specific form, determined and understood in the forms of capital, wage-labor, and the production of commodities." Williams goes on to argue that if "production" means the production of material commodities for a market, then different and misleading terms have been used for every other kind of production and productive force, including the "creation" of aesthetic and artistic products.

Williams advocates a change in terminology and thinking regarding artistic labor, because in advanced capitalism the production of artistic forms of expression (Williams specifically mentions music) has become an important area of capitalist production. Williams asks that those who examine the arena of art, ideas, and aesthetics not lose sight of the material social processes that go into producing artistic works. In advanced capitalist societies, Williams argues, it is problematic to see industrial production as constituting the "base" of society, as he alleges many Marxists are wont to do. Instead, Williams advocates a reevaluation of the base-superstructure model which envisions the activities of the superstructure not as taking place *because of* activity generated by the economic base, but rather *in tandem* with the economic base. This criticism should be taken very seriously, and world-systems theorists would agree with Williams' argument, noting that the base and superstructure cannot help but work in tandem. In fact, these theorists would go one step further and argue that they should not be considered as separate spheres. Rather, political economy should be viewed as operating in its capacity as culture, just as culture should be viewed as operating in its capacity as political economy.

Continuing with the Marxist theoretical approach advanced by both Polanyi and Williams, Toby Miller and his co-authors examine political policies and practices that have affected labor and production, and also shaped how films are made within and outside of the Hollywood system. Miller et al. (2005) propose a new approach to film studies. They explain:

> Unlike economic neo-conservatives, we do not assume the primacy of the markets in allocating preferences. Unlike market researchers, we do not accept Hollywood's version of itself as narrator of universal stories. Unlike textual reductionists, we do not assume it is adequate to interpret a film's internal qualities or its supposed 'positioning' of mythic spectators. And unlike the psy-complexes (psychology, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and psychiatry), we do not seek to divine what is going on inside audiences' heads. (P. 5)

Miller et al. suggest that Hollywood not be viewed as a free market open to anyone who has the ambition, drive, and talent to make films. By rooting an analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* in the political and economic framework suggested by Miller, we can move beyond seeing Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* primarily as a public expression of religious conviction. Placing the film within a discussion of economic policies and labor allows us to see the film as a product of creative labor made possible, in part, because of foreign and domestic state economic policies that aid Hollywood filmmakers. As Miller *et al* point out, Hollywood should be seen as wielding immense power in the New International Division of Cultural Labor, and any production made within this system is possible because of this new global integration of the production process.

As both an actor and director, Mel Gibson has been aided and constrained by this division of labor as well as the institutional and organizational framework of Hollywood; overall, though, Gibson should be seen as a double beneficiary of these neoliberal arrangements. In making and promoting this film, Gibson was aided by the economic policies in place at the time as well as the political rationalities that emerged from the philosophical underpinnings of neoliberalism and its fellow movements on the right, neoconservatism and the New Right. These advantages and how they contributed to the box office success of *The Passion of the Christ* are explored in this chapter. First, Gibson's long history in Hollywood and his immense wealth gave him advantages many "independent" filmmakers can only dream of having. Second, he was able to take advantage of the effects of neoliberal economic policies to capitalize on domestic and international labor arrangements and trade agreements to make his film in Rome. Finally, Gibson successfully tapped into the ideologies, or political rationalities – specifically individualism and victimization – that accompanied neoliberalism, neoconservatism and the New Right, to promote his film.

Financing and Scriptwriting: Gibson Uses His "Insider" Status

Wasko (2003: 33) explains that it is quite expensive to make a Hollywood film. In 2002, the average negative cost, or amount spent on actual production costs for a Hollywood film, was approximately $59 million, with average marketing costs weighing in at a little over thirty million dollars (Wasko 2003: 33). Because making a film is so prohibitively expensive, most movies made in Hollywood are financed using development deals, where a studio or production company agrees to provide funding for writers, producers, and directors to develop a project. Wasko explains that often during the development process, a script is written and polished, actors and directors are hired, and contracts are negotiated. One can easily see that because of cost alone, Hollywood is a very difficult place for an individual to see his or her creative visions turned into actual products. Far from a "free market" that privileges all creative ideas equally, Hollywood should, at best, be viewed as a “restricted market” open only to those with capital, high social standing, or both.

Because of his wealth and his past Hollywood success, Gibson had access to monetary and production-related resources that allowed him to put his theological vision of Jesus’ last hours onto the big screen. Part of Gibson’s privilege comes from his membership in the small group of Hollywood actors who are paid over $25 million to star in a single movie (Bart 2002: 6). Before he made *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson starred in the film *We Were Soldiers* (2002) for which he was paid $25 million. In addition to acting, Gibson has also established himself as businessperson in the film industry by producing, directing, and running (along with partner Bruce Davey) Icon productions, a lucrative production and foreign sales entity (Bart 2002: 6). In addition, he held some foreign rights on *We Were Soldiers* through Icon productions and was able to garner a substantial profit (Bing et al. 2002: 1). Because of this most recent and several past financial successes, Gibson was able to independently finance *The Passion of the Christ*, eschewing the traditional Hollywood financing and development agreements which Wasko describes. In this way, Gibson’s financial model resonates with the neoliberal political rationality of individualism discussed in detail in chapter two. Indeed, Gibson can be seen as the classic neoliberal individual, or “self-made man,” who, at least when making *The Passion of the Christ*, operated outside of the system, independently, with his own funding to pursue his own goals and aspirations.

When Gibson was scouting locations to shoot *The Passion of the Christ* in August 2002, he was committed to producing the project but had not yet pledged to direct it

(Harris and Dunkley 2002: 5). At that time, no studio had agreed to assist him in making the film, including Fox, the studio where Icon is housed and with which the production company signed a first look agreement in March 2002 (McNary and Harris 2002:1; Harris and Dunkley 2002: 5). At that time, Fox was reluctant to secure any distribution rights for the film, a position it maintained until the film proved to be financially successful.[2] When he began pre-production of the film in the fall of 2002, Gibson signed on Davey and Steve McEveety as producers of the film through the Marquis Films division of Icon (Rooney 2002b: 1). Gibson invested around thirty million dollars of his own funds in making *The Passion of the Christ* and was able to keep his costs relatively low by shooting the film in Italy and casting actors who were relatively unknown to American audiences (Marr 2004). Investing his own funds into film projects was not new for Gibson, who in 1990 financed *Hamlet* and has proven to be one of the wealthiest filmmakers of his generation (*Variety* 2004a).

As mentioned above, in addition to having financial power, Gibson also holds the privileged status of "Hollywood insider." Wasko (2003: 91) points out that it is very difficult for a newcomer to break into the Hollywood filmmaking industry. Gibson co-wrote the screenplay for *The Passion of the Christ* with Benedict Fitzgerald who had Hollywood experience mostly writing literary adaptations. He is best known for the teleplay *Zelda* (1993) based on the life of Zelda Fitzgerald and for the screenplays of

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[2] While Fox never did distribute the film in the United States, it was the major distributor in Latin America. The home entertainment division of the corporation did secure distribution rights for the DVD version of the film.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1994) and Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1996) (Ackman 2004; Ryan 2004: 2). Wasko (1993: 31) explains that Hollywood is a “closed market” when it comes to considering scripts. For the most part, only those who have established previous connections to a director, producer, or studio will be given production consideration. Because he is a wealthy Hollywood insider, unlike most people (even in the filmmaking business), Gibson was able to take on this expensive pet project even in the face of rejection from major Hollywood studios.

Shooting at Cinecitta: Labor and Runaway Productions

Miller et al. (2005: 111) remind us that labor is the source of international screen value, and so to be able to truly evaluate a film, we must look at the labor and laborers who bring the finished film projects to us. In our era of advanced capitalism, governed by neoliberal policies, “all aspects of Hollywood work have…been transformed by both new technologies and new work relations” (Miller et al. 2005: 115). The result of this transformation has been the emphasis on “flexible specialization” that moves many laborers out of the company or studio system and treats them as freelance, consultative, casual, and self-employed individuals (Miller 2005: 114). This transformation has been particularly detrimental to secondary or “below-the-line workers” as they are called in the film industry, as they have been left without economic security (Miller et al. 2005: 115).

While the labor structure has been transformed rather rapidly, changes in the perceptions over the value of work in the service industry, which includes many jobs in the filmmaking industry, have not kept pace. Allen (1996: 303) explains that a consequence of this ideological lag is that “the qualities of manufacturing jobs and service jobs tend to be regarded as quite different." The result is that many secondary or service sector jobs are designated as part-time or for those with few skills. Allen (1996: 303) contends that as society views some sources of income and wealth as more valid than others, this affects how secondary or service jobs are viewed and how much protection members of society feel these laborers are worthy of receiving. This is the case in Hollywood, as those in the secondary labor market, or peripheral employees, are caught in perennial uncertainty and lack anything beyond contingent wages. Unlike their counterparts in Hollywood's primary labor market, writers and actors, workers in the secondary labor market are not protected by large and established labor unions. As mentioned in chapter two, this undermining of labor is consistent with the neoliberal agenda (endorsed by the United States government) of attacking labor and weakening the ability of workers to fight back against management. This has lowered the real value of the minimum wage. Also, labor laws have been interpreted to favor management in order to bust unions, resulting in an overall weakening of the social safety net (Campbell 2005).

In their examination of Hollywood, Miller et al. (2005: 7, 31) argue that Hollywood's global hegemony is built, in large part, on the suppression of workers' rights with little regard for their collective livelihood. To illustrate Hollywood's disregard for protecting laborers, Miller et al. describe the increasing number of runaway productions, or those productions that are developed and intended for release in the United States but are filmed in other countries. As individuals who write, produce, star in, and direct films, above-the-line workers are protected by labor unions, are paid salaries, and are more easily able to travel to foreign locales for the shooting of a film.

Those actors and others who are not able to travel and may not have star power are sometimes harmed when directors and production crews decide to shoot films in countries other than the United States. However, coupled with the new flexible specialization of Hollywood labor practices, runaway productions mostly harm below-the-line workers – those who work, for example, as make-up artists, carpenters, costumers, set designers and electricians, and who are not protected by union wages and contracts. While these below-the-line workers may be paid less today than they were in "old Hollywood," because of their lack of union membership and industry demands for flexible specialization, it is still less expensive for many filmmakers to make their movies overseas.

In spite of all the opportunities for tax subsidies that are offered by various states and communities in the United States (Miller et al. 2005: 93), Gibson not only shot his film in Italy, an element that could be explained because of Gibson's need for a landscape that resembled the Holy Land, but he also did most of the pre- and post-production work on *The Passion* in Rome. The problem of runaway productions has become so pressing that the Screen Actors Guild, the primary Hollywood actors' union, put the concern over runaway productions at the top of their agenda (Miller et al. 2005: 137; Wasko 2003: 218). Moreover, the problem of runaway productions is seen as so damaging to the American economy and U.S. laborers that the United States Conference of Mayors adopted a resolution discouraging runaway productions, highlighting the importance of domestic film-making to their cities (Miller et al. 2005: 117-118). While Gibson is certainly not the only Hollywood director who has produced movies in countries other than the United States, he is a member of the Screen Actors Guild and because of this, he likely is more aware of the problem of runaway productions than other directors.

In spite of concerns over economic damage done by runaway productions, Gibson began pre-production on *The Passion* in the early fall of 2002 at Rome's Cinecitta Studios. According to Miller et al. (2005: 147), Italy has had a long history of hosting runaway productions. During Mussolini's reign, politics restricted business for many years. Policies changed as part of post-war film production, and in hopes of boosting local cinema, the Italian government passed a cinema law in 1949 that guaranteed screening time to locally-made films. However, little else was done in terms of cultural protection, which caused major Hollywood studios to invest in Cinecitta studio's plant and production facilities and begin co-productions. In the 1950s and 1960s, several stars and others who had been denied employment in Hollywood because of their leftism found a home in Italy making films. Because of rising labor and production costs, Hollywood took a brief break from making films in Italy, but interest was renewed in the 1960s with the popularity of Spaghetti Westerns, where Italian landscapes stood in for Mexico and the American West (Miller 2005: 147).

In the mid-1990s, Cinecitta was restructured, partially privatized, and began actively courting Hollywood directors with new soundstages and up-to-date digital imaging technology. To further attract foreign filmmakers to Rome, Cinecitta opened an office in Los Angeles in 2002 and offices in New York and London in 2003 (*Variety* 2003). In addition, Cinecitta lobbied the Italian government to get films classified as "temporary exports" so producers would not have to pay a value-added tax when they brought films back into the country for post-production work (Horst 2002).

In a short time, Hollywood filmmakers, including Martin Scorsese, who filmed *Gangs of New York* at the studio in 2002, began to take advantage of the services that Cinecitta had to offer. In 2002, Carole Andre Smith, the director of international marketing and communications for the studio, told *Variety* that "American productions are the lifeblood of Cinecitta. They are our favorite clients; the combination of low cost and very high quality makes Cinecitta ideal for this kind of production" (Rooney 2002a: 12). Smith explained that American films bring in between $15 and $20 million dollars for the Roman economy with 10 – 20% spent at the studio (Rooney 2002a:12). Smith has actively promoted Rome as "the second-largest film community outside of Los Angeles" with Hollywood-like, world-class, below-the-line workers (Horst 2002: A4). So popular and competent are Cinecitta's crews that they often are sent to other parts of Europe to work. For example, almost the entire crew of *Cold Mountain* (2003) were Italian workers who traveled to Romania for filming (Horst 2002: A4).

Like Hollywood directors before him, Gibson took advantage of the resources available to him in Italy and at Cinecitta. As far as casting was concerned, Gibson made one choice: selecting American actor James Caviezel to play Jesus. Rome-based casting agent Shelia Rubin hired the remainder of the cast, two-thirds of whom, along with most other members of the production crew, were Italian (Vivarelli 2004: 9, 13). The Italian cast did not have to travel far as Gibson shot the film in Matera, Italy, an area that has a precedent for standing in for the Holy Land. In the early 1960s, Pasolini shot *The Gospel*

According to St. Matthew (1964) in the region, and in the 1980s, Richard Gere came to Matera to play the title role in *King David* (1985) (Bruni 2002: A4). By shooting *The Passion of the Christ* at Cinecitta, Gibson was able to pay most workers wages and salaries below Hollywood union requirements by capitalizing on the expectation that, according to Miller et. al. (2005: 148) "screen workers should work between fifty and fifty-seven hours a week before overtime, with their pay in relation to budgets rather than skills and relativities." In a humorous article written about *The Passion,* Peter Bart (2004: 5, 61), recognizing the small wages that these actors were given in relationship to the profit that Gibson earned, asks that those who worked for scale on *The Passion of the Christ* be given bonuses in the same vein that Peter Jackson and George Lucas did with their casts of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*.

When Hollywood studios agree to finance, promote, or distribute a film, they do so with the expectation that their efforts will result in a profit for the company. By taking on a controversial subject, the execution of Jesus, Gibson exceeded the acceptable risk tolerance typically allowed by executives at Fox. However, as shown above with his concerns over the film's budget, he did not stand outside Hollywood's concern for the bottom line. To understand the success of *The Passion of the Christ*, it is important to see Gibson as both entrepreneur and ideologue and in doing so examine the steps he took to protect his spiritual and financial investment in *The Passion.* The first and perhaps most significant step was marketing and positioning this film for a conservative Christian audience.

Marketing and Positioning: Calling on the Faithful

Wasko (2003: 55) explains that the purpose of marketing a film is to alleviate uncertainty and manage the risk over whether a particular film will be successful. Miller *et al* (2005: 261) go further to say that marketing is central to the Hollywood machine, noting that the industry "invests nearly twice as much money in marketing activities as do other comparable industries." Because of the large investment made when making a Hollywood film, marketers do everything they can to ensure that their products will be popular with audiences (Wasko 2003: 55). The uncertainty surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*'s financial viability was likely the primary reason that Hollywood's major studios did not commit to financing the project. Miller et al. (2005: 262) point out that anxiety over whether a film will be successful in Hollywood is due in part to the likelihood of its failure, which is no longer a dirty little secret but fundamental to the business of Hollywood.

To minimize "market failure," Hollywood marketers take great pains to understand the audience and what it wants to see on screen. Because of the research and statistical procedures used to figure out exactly what the audience wants, Miller et al. (2005: 262) argue that the audience should not be thought of as a locus of demand but rather as a calculation and construction made and determined by producers. While Hollywood always seems to be looking for what audience members would like to see on the screen, audience demand should not be thought of as the engine that drives which Hollywood films are produced and which are not. Rather, how easily a film is positioned in the minds of viewers, how that positioning resonates with audience members, and how marketable a film is to an audience typically dictates what is made in Hollywood. In this way, marketing, and not audience preference, acts as a gate-keeping procedure for which Hollywood productions are made, which are not, and the type of distribution that a film will receive. For example, if a film is considered too complicated to market to audiences or producers predict that the film will have limited appeal, a film may be made and marketed through small independent or “boutique” labels.

Since Gibson made *The Passion of the Christ* with his own funds, he can be viewed as a devout individual dedicated to promoting his personal understanding of religion and faith. However, in light of the aforementioned information about marketing and positioning, it would be short-sighted not to consider how Gibson used his Hollywood marketing savvy to promote interest in his film and ensure financial profit. If Gibson’s goal was simply to make a film about the life of Jesus as a ministry tool, he could have distributed it through churches and other religious organizations, as was the case with the *Jesus* film project, which was produced and distributed in 1979 by Campus Crusade for Christ. One goal of Christianity is mass conversion and in marketing *The Passion of the Christ* Gibson used both his money and talents to ensure that his spiritual meditation would play to the masses by garnering a large theatrical audience. Gibson chose to release this film in mainstream theaters and, with this decision, engaged in the publicity and marketing strategies that are intrinsic to promoting any Hollywood film.

It is difficult to find information that points to any attempt on Gibson’s behalf to do market research prior to making *The Passion.* However, with a presidential election in November 2004, in which religion was an important topic, and the recent popularity of other Christian-themed movies like *The Omega Code* (1999) and *Left Behind* (2000)[3], releasing a film about the life of Jesus may not have been as risky as it seemed to studio executives. While these Christian-themed films were successful, it is important to remember that the relationship between church-going individuals and Hollywood is fairly new. With the exception of these overtly religiously-themed films, Hollywood products have typically not been positively viewed by religious individuals. The key to making *The Passion of the Christ* a box office success was to build on the success of *The Omega Code* and *Left Behind* by courting the group of individuals for whom religious issues are important and who are willing to spend money watching Christian-themed programming.

Jameson (1991: 18) argues that a defining characteristic that distinguishes late capitalism from other economic eras is that late capitalism is marked by commodities being valued for their exchange value, or the value that a commodity holds in relationship to other commodities. This emphasis on exchange value is in opposition to an emphasis on "use value," which is the value that a commodity possesses for meeting social needs. Jameson (1999: 18) argues that in late capitalism "use value" of commodities is a memory that has been effaced and replaced by images, which are so central to social life that they often mediate relationships between individuals. Hollywood is essentially in the business of capitalizing on these mediated relationships and does so by managing the images of stars as well as constructing literal images on the big screen. To ensure that these films appeal to target audiences, discussions about how to promote and sell films take place when works are in their infancy, before formal production even begins (Wasko 1993: 193). An essential component of the marketing process is publicity, which Wasko (1993: 193-194) defines as unpaid media attention that typically results from deliberate and calculated planning. For most films, publicity is very carefully coordinated as publicists try to create buzz for a movie by releasing press kits, books that supply advertising materials, and promotional items. Often publicity involves stars associated with the movie showing up at openings, press junkets, and sneak previews.

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[3] Self-promoted *The Omega Code* grossed $13 million at the box office in 1999 and in 2000, *Left Behind* (also self-promoted) grossed $4.3 million. While these figures pale in comparison to the $600 million plus Gibson made world-wide, these films point to a burgeoning interest in Christian-themed films or, at a minimum, a precedent for Christians attending the movies. Both films sold a large number of videocassettes and DVDs (Horn 2003).

Publicity

That Gibson, or one of his associates, did not have complete control over the publicity surrounding *The Passion* was evident when Christopher Noxon (2003), a freelance reporter for *The New York Times Magazine,* wrote an article pointing out that Gibson adheres to traditional Catholicism, a movement within the Catholic Church that officially rejects the modernizing reforms brought about in the Church by the Vatican II Council of 1962-1965. In the article, Noxon (2003: 53) interviewed Gibson's father Hutton Gibson, an author and activist in traditionalist Catholic circles who believes, among other things, that the Second Vatican Council was a "masonic plot backed by the Jews" and who rejects the fact that six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. In addition to painting a less-than-charitable portrait of Mel Gibson's father, Noxon also revealed that Gibson planned to make *The Passion of the Christ*. Perhaps as "damage control," Gibson agreed to give an interview to *The Wall Street Journal* not long after Noxon's piece ran (Arroyo 2003: W13).

Noxon's article and *The Wall Street Journal* were picked up by members of the interfaith community, and within two weeks of the appearance of these articles, an ecumenical ad-hoc committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) was established to address potential concerns about the film. In early April, the scholars received a copy of the script and gave the project a less-than-favorable review; central to their critique was Gibson's portrayal of Jewish characters. On May 16, Gibson's attorney sent a letter to the scholars' committee that began, "As you are fully aware, you are in possession of property stolen from Icon, namely a draft of the screenplay for the Picture." The letter went to on say that the committee had at no time been given an authorized release of the material, that they had obtained the script by illegal means, and that the committee was "attempting to force my client [Gibson] to alter the screenplay to the Picture to suit your own religious views" (Fredriksen 2003b: 27).

By not only rejecting, but opposing, the scholars' report, Gibson tried to regain control of the publicity for *The Passion*. Masterfully, he positioned himself as facing persecution from the Anti-Defamation League, religious scholars, and the mainstream media who covered the communications that took place between Icon and the committee. In taking an adversarial stance against these groups, Gibson positioned himself as a victim persecuted by thinkers who disagreed with him and the Christian message he was promoting through his film. This antagonistic positioning served Gibson well as the negative reactions to *The Passion of the Christ* only intensified as the release date drew near. As Miller et al. (2003: 268) explain, when marketers set out to promote a film, they look for ways that a movie will connect with viewers. This involves “finding elements of a story that can be communicated as simply as possible” (Miller et al. 2003: 268). By taking a victim stance, Gibson connected with those on the right who also felt attacked by the same groups that Gibson claimed were persecuting him.

A. O. Scott (2004a: E1.1) of *The New York Times* explained this persecution dynamic, noting that “those Catholics and evangelical Protestants who felt alienated from much of American commercial culture and who informed the earlier protests [against Hollywood film content], have not only a powerful and glamorous Hollywood ally in Mr. Gibson but also a growing sense of cultural and political confidence.” Stanley (2004: E1:1), also of *The New York Times*, further explains Gibson’s appeal to those who rallied around *The Passion:* “Mr. Gibson [was] viewed not as an artist flouting convention and mainstream Hollywood orthodoxies, but as a lobbyist for the fundamentalist religious movement in the United States at a time when its clout [was] unmistakably on the rise.” Even more interesting, in this publicity campaign, Gibson’s identification with very conservative, pre-Vatican II traditional Roman Catholicism, a version of Christianity rejected by most evangelicals, was not held against him, because, as Richard (2004: B1) points out, “He’s a conservative and a star.” Denominational ties were overlooked, argues Meacham (2004), because of “the common belief that the larger secular world – including the mainstream media – is essentially hostile to Christianity.”

Rich (2003b) saw the film’s promotion resembling a political rather than a spiritual campaign, because,

> … for the film's supporters, the battle is of a piece with the same blue state-red state cultural chasm as the conflicts over the Ten Commandments in the Alabama courthouse, the growing legitimization of homosexuality (Mr. Gibson has had his innings with gays in the past) and the leadership of a president who wraps public policy in religiosity and called the war against terrorism a 'crusade' until his handlers intervened. (P. 2.1)

Rich (2004a: 2.1) opined that the publicity strategy for *The Passion* included "Mr. Gibson and his supporters [trying to] slur the religiosity of anyone who might dissent from his rollout of *The Passion*" by accusing both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* of being "anti-Christian" newspapers. Rich ties the situation to a larger atmosphere of political "oneupmanship" where "secularists" are seen as subversives and those who follow God are patriots.

An anecdote illustrating this situation is relayed by Boyer (2003). Before a screening of *The Passion* for televangelist Robert Schuller, Gibson was given the book *Journalistic Fraud: How* The New York Times *Distorts the News and Why it Cannot be Trusted* by Bob Kohn. The fact that *The New York Times* was the first major newspaper to take a critical stance toward Gibson and *The Passion* project profoundly confirmed the anti-Christian stereotypes held by evangelicals about this newspaper and the media in general. In reaction to *The New York Times* writer Frank Rich's article criticizing the project, a war of words ensued between the two men, with Gibson playing into the masculine and violently militaristic political rationalities mentioned in chapter two by saying of Rich, "I want to kill him. I want his intestines on a stick...I want to kill his dog" (Boyer 2003: 67). This was answered with Rich accusing Gibson of going on *The*

O'Reilly Factor "looking for a brawl," noting that he has not let up because "his over-the-top ramblings are, of course, conceived in part to sell his products" (Rich 2003b: 2.1).

Recall from chapter two that part of Pat Robertson's motivation for founding CBN, or the Christian Broadcasting Network, was his belief that mainstream media are liberal and biased against conservative and religious points of view. This feeling of unfairness in the media accounts, in part, for the success of the Fox News channel, established in October 1996. The channel's slogan, "fair and balanced," reflects the victim rationality – one that indicates that the mainstream media has not been fair in covering conservative and religious perspectives and stories told about these groups have not been balanced. Ironically, Fox's corrective was not to be fair or balanced, but to skew their coverage in favor of the right. Most importantly, in promoting *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson was able to take the negative publicity he received and not only deflect it but also contextualize it as part of the victimization that those on the right have experienced (recall this discussion from chapter two). Recall Jameson's (1999) assertion that in late capitalism, images are of central importance to our social lives and to mediating our relationships with one another. By tapping into the Fox-newsesque message of an unfair media, Gibson was able to cultivate an image that effectively resonated with his target audience.

Caldwell (2004: 214) points out that months before the film opened, the website www.SupportMelGibson.com posted the headline, "Why Do Jewish Leaders Want to Censor Mel Gibson?" The author of the page described Gibson as the stalwart believer David against the anti-Christian Hollywood establishment and politically powerful

Jewish Goliath. Ironically, the very “anti-Christian” Hollywood establishment that was attacked by Gibson and his followers is the same entity responsible for generating the wealth that made *The Passion* possible. However, this was not a consideration of *The Passion*’s supporters. *The Passion of the Christ* was positioned as something bigger than a film: it became a rallying point and symbol of what some Christians and other religious believers saw as their faith under attack.

Promotion and Distribution

Smythe (1981: 233) argues that audiences should be viewed as commodities and that the effort they put into receiving various media should be regarded as labor. Rather than passively consuming entertainment, especially media subsidized and supported by advertising, as a leisure activity, Smythe asserts that the activity of viewing entertainment should be considered uncompensated labor (Meehan 1993: 382). Further, audiences should not be seen as easily gratified, but should be viewed as entities that are actively cultivated. Smythe notes that when advertisers spend money to appeal to audiences, “what they buy are the services of audiences with predictable specifications which will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communications (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and third-class mail) in particular market areas.” To actively cultivate the audience for his film, in August 2003, six months before the film’s official release in theaters, Gibson began a publicity tour that included private showings of *The Passion of the Christ* to select groups of evangelical Christians, conservative Catholics, right-wing pundits, Republican Party members, and supportive Jewish leaders. Not coincidently, these were the same groups who came to his aid when they saw the movie attacked in the mainstream press. Gibson was highly selective with regard to the composition of these audiences, showing the film only to those he was sure would give it a favorable review while deliberately keeping it from those who might give it a poor evaluation, i.e., most mainstream media critics (Goodstein 2003: A1). On August 9, 2003, Gibson kicked off his grass-roots marketing campaign when he previewed four minutes of the film to a stadium full of evangelical Christians attending Orange County California's Harvest Crusade gathering (Lobdell 2003: A1). The work that Gibson did to cultivate these audiences, and the work that these audiences did in viewing and generating interest in the film, paid off handsomely as the film piqued much curiosity and gained favorable interest. In spite of audience enthusiasm and Gibson's attempts to ward off negative publicity, he was not able to find a major studio to distribute the film.

Wasko (2003: 60) describes film distribution as a process designed to benefit the distributor of a film and not the production company. Distributors are middlemen and wholesalers who arrange for the exhibition of films in theaters, decide on release schedules, store and ship prints, conduct market research, and build hype around a movie (Wasko 2003: 84). In distribution deals, licensing is done with individual theaters (mostly through theater chains) whose rights and deals vary from theater to theater and from film to film (Wasko 2003: 85). Two primary production modes exist in the Hollywood film system: studio and independent film production. Studio films are those made within the major studios while independent films are made outside of the major studio system. "Independent" films, Wasko points out, are not designed to run counter to, but parallel with, Hollywood production. While being an independent producer may give filmmakers more creative control over a project, independent producers almost always need the major studios to distribute their films. Independent film was once associated with art films or the use of experimental techniques in filmmaking. However, since the 1990s, the term "indie" has become synonymous with "small studio production." Since he used his own funds to make *The Passion of the Christ* and seemed to have had complete artistic control over the project, Gibson should be considered an independent film producer in this instance. While small studios, like Icon, may be able to independently produce films, rarely are they able to independently distribute their films (Wasko 2003: 79). Though Gibson technically fits the definition of independent producer, he obviously did not operate with a "small studio" budget. This enabled him to break the independent filmmaker mold again and independently distribute *The Passion of the Christ*.

As mentioned above, Gibson originally showed *The Passion of the Christ* to 20th Century Fox, the studio with which Icon had signed a first-look agreement, but Fox declined to distribute it. Because Fox had been cold to *The Passion* since its development days, Gibson enlisted International Creative Management, his longtime talent agency, to help him find the best way to release the movie (Lobdell 2003: A1). One strategy Gibson considered was releasing the movie through a theater chain instead of a studio. This may have been why Gibson showed the film to Philip Anschutz, a conservative Presbyterian and owner of Regal Cinema Christian-oriented Crusader Entertainment though nothing came of this private viewing (Lobdell 2003: A1). Though

Miramax Film Corporation and Lions Gate Film, Inc., had expressed interest in seeing the film, Gibson decided to personally handle the film's marketing and distribution through Icon Entertainment (Horn 2003: C-6). By personally handling the distribution, Gibson avoided the awkward spectacle of having other studios turn it down. Distribution was not new to Icon, as the company had released most of Gibson's recent movies in Britain, New Zealand, and Australia. In the long-run, self-distribution was financially beneficial to Gibson, who was able to remain close to the decisions surrounding the marketing and distribution of the film, including poster design and which theaters would show the film.

Gibson enlisted the help of Newmarket Films, which distributed *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Memento* (2000), to help with shipping prints of the film and collecting money from theaters (Horn 2003: C-6). In addition to coordinating the logistics of distribution, Gibson was able to enlist the help of Bob Berney, the President of Newmarket, who has a track record of taking on tough-to-market films such as *Happiness* (1998) and *Monster* (2003) (*Variety* 2004a: 88-91). While Gibson and Icon went after the grassroots aspects of marketing the movie by garnering support from evangelical congregations across the nation, Berney's job was to "make the film as mainstream as possible" (*Variety* 2004a: 88-91). Because Newmarket does not have television deals, international distribution partners, or a video division, it has been able to retain more independence than other distributors and take on riskier projects (*Variety* 2004a: 88-91). Berney and Newmarket drew on their vast theater contacts to convince theater owners that this film would play to the masses; they described the marketing plan as "campaign-style" with George Bush conservatives as the target audience. The marketing campaign for *The Passion of the Christ*, which took place in the late months of 2003 and early months of 2004, coincided with George Bush's presidential campaign, which was taking place and would culminate in his election in November 2004.

The combined Newmarket/Icon grass-roots strategy for marketing *The Passion* worked, as the film appealed to Catholics and drew rave reviews in Colorado Springs, the evangelical capital of the United States (Goodstein 2003: A1; Waxman 2004a: E1). Some of the most successful campaign tactics included Bishop Kenneth C. Ulmer of the Central Bible Church in Los Angeles showing the trailer of the movie during one of his sermons on Sunday morning, after which he encouraged his congregants to purchase tickets for a special screening of the film during its opening week (Marr 2004: B1). Ulmer was a member of a group of people asked by Gibson to speak at a pastor's conference in Orlando, Florida, at which 5,000 pastors were invited to view and discuss the film. Church leaders like Ulmer were aided in part by a California marketing firm that coached clergy on blanket-buying tickets for the film, organizing mass viewings, and distributing literature about the film (*The Observer* 2004). According to *The New York Times*, church groups ordered large numbers of tickets. For example, a multiplex in Plano, Texas, planned to reserve all twenty of its screens to show *The Passion* on its opening day; in Costa Mesa, California, some churches moved Sunday services to the cinema in order for local congregations to view the film; and The Catholic League gave away 3,000 discounted tickets (Waxman 2004a: E1; *The Observer* 2004). Alan Nierob, a Gibson spokesperson, said that the outreach to pastors and churches was in the interest of marketing, as Newmarket Films did not have a large marketing budget to pay for focus groups and advertising (Goodstein 2004a: A18). While *The Passion* may not have had the advertising budget of most Hollywood blockbusters, its grassroots strategy proved to be quite successful and was enhanced by a Christian cable channel broadcast that showed clips of *The Passion* and discussed how the film could be used as a religious tool to convert people. Considering the small marketing budget afforded to *The Passion*, Gibson was able to accomplish a remarkable feat by winning the favor of religious leaders, appealing to Christian audiences, and capitalizing on one area that has recently become a staple of any large production – merchandising.

Merchandising and Revenue: Profiting from The Passion

Miller et al. (2001: 156) note how important cross-promotional and merchandising tie-ins have become for raising awareness of a film across media and non-media publicity channels. *The Passion of the Christ* was no exception, as merchandising was one of the most effective strategies for marketing the film to evangelical Christians who, Wheeler (in Hoover 2000: 151) points out, have a more vast and distinctive material culture than other religious groups. These materials, which are distinctly evangelical artifacts, range from Christian gothic novels, to posters, greeting cards, bumper stickers, ceramics, and jewelry. Merchandise accompanying the film included nail pendants inscribed with the Bible verse Isaiah 53:3, stills of the movie, lapel pins in Aramaic, door hangers advertising the movie, CD-ROMs with pictures of the nails that were put into Jesus' hands, and a stock car with a *Passion* paint scheme featured at the Daytona 500 (Goodstein 2004a: A.18). In April 2004, the book *The Passion: Photography from the*

Movie (Tyndale House) reached number three on *The New York Times* best-seller non-fiction list, was in its eighth printing, and had sold 650,000 copies, with the publisher intending to make editions of the book available in eight different languages (Thompson 2004: E.1). Bob Siemon Designs, the film's only licensee for jewelry, added thirty-five people to its staff of 125 to meet demand for the 150,000 crosses and 125,000 pewter crucifixion nails it sold. Gibson's combination of grass-roots marketing, culture war positioning, and diversified merchandising helped place *The Passion* in the number one position at the box office both during its opening weekend and during its seventh week in theaters - dates that coincided with the Christian holidays, Ash Wednesday and Easter.

Wasko (2003: 105) explains that the opening weekend of a movie has become increasingly important, as seventy to seventy-five percent of a film's revenue is usually earned at this time. Neirob stated that *The Passion* was a rare instance where the demand for the film dictated its release pattern (Waxman 2004a: E1). Due to the large number of pre-release ticket requests received by theaters, as of January 15, 2004 Newmarket planned a wide release of the film on 2,000 screens across the nation (Waxman 2004a: E1). By February 20, 2004 this number had increased to 2,800, with Newmarket President Bob Berney planning to distribute more than 4,000 prints of the movie (Marr 2004: B.1). On Friday, February 26, 2004, two days after it opened, *The Passion* was shown on 4,793 screens in 3,043 theaters.

Typically, as a movie continues its run, the number of screens on which it is shown decreases. In the case of *The Passion of the Christ,* the number of screens increased. At is widest, *The Passion* was shown at 3,408 theaters (boxofficemojo.com).

According to Berney, the distribution of the film went according to plan, with the film opening on Ash Wednesday and sustaining itself until Easter Sunday, when it jumped back to the number one spot (Thompson 2004: E.1). It was not just Bible belt cities whose theaters were packed during opening weekend; the film was a big hit in Tucson, Chicago, San Antonio, and Phoenix, cities with large Latino-Roman Catholic populations. Berney even reported full houses at the AMC Theater on 42nd Street in Manhattan and the ArcLights Cinemas in Hollywood (Thompson 2004: E.1; Waxman 2004c: E.1,3).

When *The Passion* closed on July 29, 2004, it had been in release for 156 days, or approximately 22.3 weeks. Around eight million dollars was generated in pre-release ticket sales, and the film earned $117.5 million during its first five days on the screen (Marr 2004: B.1; Ackerman 2002). On opening day alone, *The Passion* brought in $23.5 million, the fifth largest Wednesday opening of a Hollywood film in history (Waxman 2004c: E.1). When the film closed in July, it had grossed $370,274,604 domestically, the tenth largest domestic gross of all time (boxofficemojo.com). Of this, Gibson likely made just short of $100 million in profit (Lippman and Marr 2004: W.1). This number comes from subtracting the theaters' shares of box office receipts and marketing costs as well as Newmarket's distribution fees and production and marketing costs (Lippman and Marr 2004: W1). Gibson owes this massive profit to the fact that he did not have a major studio distribute his movie and was personally able to strike lucrative deals with distributors (Lippman and Marr 2004: W.1). Lippman and Marr (2003: W.1) estimated that if global box office receipts reached $400 million, Gibson stood to make another

$100 million. However, Gibson did not do nearly as well with global receipts, grossing $241,116,490. Typically, films make as much or more in foreign sales as they do domestically.

While Fox did not distribute *The Passion of the Christ* in the United States, it did buy the rights to distribute the film in most of Asia (including China), and Latin America, where the film did best overall. This success was in spite of the unprecedented “adults only” rating it received in Mexico and the fact that Chile, the most conservative nation in the region, allowed only those age fourteen or older to view the film (de la Fuente 2004: 9-10). Between March 19-21, *The Passion*, which made $15.5 million during this time, was the top earner overseas due mostly to its appeal to Catholic audiences in Latin America, Poland, Spain, and Gibson’s home base, Australia (Groves 2004a: 12). The success that *The Passion* experienced in Spain was due in large part to the endorsement that film distributor Aurum secured from the Catholic Church, which resulted in priests bringing their congregants to the theater. With its host of Italian actors, it is not surprising that *The Passion* was a box office hit in Italy where it was released over Easter weekend and earned $14.6 million in only seven days (Groves 2004c). Within more secularized and protestant Western European countries, *The Passion* did not experience as much success. During its opening weekend in Germany, the film was second to Disney’s *Brother Bear* (2004), while in France, where it was panned by critics, it finished second at the box office to the French film *Les Choristes* (2004).

Just as the marketing and distribution of *The Passion* were not without controversy, at least in the United States, collecting money from theater chains also caused trouble for Gibson. However, like the controversy surrounding the film, this problem ended up working in Gibson's favor. Gibson owes the size of his profits in part to the fact that Icon distribution sued Regal Entertainment for forty million dollars and Muvico theaters for one million dollars over money Gibson alleged he did not receive from box office receipts ("Gibson Sues Over *Passion* Profits" 2004). Gibson also profited from DVD and video sales of *The Passion of the Christ*. Miller et al. (2005: 299) argue that distribution is as important for DVDs and videos as it is for the theatrical film itself. While Gibson could not convince Fox to distribute *The Passion of the Christ* domestically in theaters, 20th Century Fox's Home Entertainment division happily agreed to distribute DVDs and VHS copies of the film (Holson 2004: E.1). Courting the same crowd that made *The Passion* a box office success, Fox sent hundreds of fliers to thousands of churches encouraging the organizations and their members to buy DVDs of the film in packs of fifty (Holson 2004: E.1). In addition to buying the film in bulk, churches could also purchase customized slip covers with two lines of printing on them for 99 cents each (Snider 2004). To increase awareness of *The Passion* going on sale, Fox sent e-mail messages to more than six million Christian households encouraging them to buy the film, and distributed 10,000 limited-edition lithographs depicting Jesus, the cross, and other religious images to church officials. Fox also ran television advertisements in most areas, concentrating them mostly in Southern cities with large Hispanic populations including Atlanta, Orlando, and Little Rock (Holson 2004: E.1).

While the DVD was available for sale at many of the expected outlets such as Best Buy and Wal-Mart, it was also sold at many specialty Christian stores and proved to be a very popular film to rent with a variety of people – some who had viewed the film in the theater and others who were hesitant to see the film in the theater because of the gore and violence (Ault 2004: 1). By buying or renting the film, these latter individuals could watch the film in the privacy and controlled environment of their own homes (Ault 2004: 1). *The Passion* DVD generated $190 million, selling nine million copies in the first seven days after its release on August 31, 2004. At least ten million copies had sold by September 17, and of those copies, a little over four million were sold on the first day with most people purchasing more than one copy (Booth 2004: F-01). The DVD offers several language options as well as narration for the vision impaired. While it is difficult to find figures for how much revenue has been generated or how much Gibson personally profited from DVD sales, filmmakers often receive 75-90 % of DVD revenues, much greater than the fifty percent they usually get back from theaters (Booth 2004: F-01). According to one Queensland, Australia, newspaper, Gibson personally netted a total of $678 million from all aspects of the film (distribution, merchandising, DVD sales), handily earning him the title "the most powerful celebrity in the world" according to Forbes magazine (Papas 2005: on-line; CNN.com 2004: on-line).

Conclusion

In the same way that Polanyi, Gramsci, and Williams ask us not to fetishize the market, or view it as an entity that has power and exists apart from social relations, Miller *et al* (2005) asks us not to fetishize films as entities that either exist apart from social relationships or always give audiences the exact films they want to watch. Like the market, the finished products that we get on the screen should be seen as the result of both careful and intentional planning and fortuitous accidents. With *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson set out to make a film about the life of Jesus, did so in Italy, profited handsomely, and in the process became an important figure for religious individuals in America. Part of Gibson's success should be attributed to how he was able to tap into two of the political rationalities that developed from the right's responses to modernity – individualism, masculinity, and most importantly victimization. Had Gibson not chosen to aggressively and publicly engage with those in the media when controversy surrounding his film arose, he would not have risen to prominence on the cultural front and his message would not have resonated with those who eventually came out in support of his film, either publicly in the media or more privately through their contributions at the box office. Gibson's public relations campaign to promote his film in many ways paralleled political narrative of victimhood advanced by the George W. Bush administration and extensively outlined in chapter two. Therefore, when Gibson articulated that he felt as if he were under attack, this discourse was familiar to potential audience members.

In the process of making and promoting *The Passion*, Gibson came to be seen as a self-made man, embodying individualism for making his film his way, this despite the fact that he clearly benefited from his status as a Hollywood insider. Further, Gibson became a hero to those who felt that public displays of religious identities were not welcome in America. Gibson was effectively able to stand up to those whom many perceived as persecuting him – a victim who eventually triumphed. While it is too much of a stretch to call Gibson a "Christ figure," an interesting parallel can be drawn between the strong go-it-alone persecuted Jesus of Gibson's *Passion* and the Jesus-like figurehead Gibson became for his viewers. This is discussed more in depth in next chapter.

If the Hollywood system stands against anything, it is films that generate too much controversy to the point that they do not make any money. There is no inherent bias against personal religious expression in filmmaking, provided that such films are profitable. By making and, more importantly, effectively selling *The Passion of the Christ* to key targeted segments of the American public, Gibson may have inadvertently become a hero to Hollywood. By leading a group of people to the theater who do not usually attend movies, Gibson potentially cultivated a new group of consumers to whom Hollywood could market it products. However, as will be discussed in chapter five, this relationship was short-lived.

CHAPTER 4

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION OF JESUS: THE CROSS AS LETHAL WEAPON

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter I covered how Gibson made *The Passion of the Christ* by using his own funds as well as taking advantage of domestic and international labor and trade arrangements. Also, the last chapter attributed Gibson's success in promoting *The Passion* in part to the emphasis he placed on his plight as a victim of the liberal media. In response to his perceived victimization, he painted himself as a strong, independent individual, who would not be defeated, restricted, or influenced by others in his quest to make his movie. Gibson's actions and positioning resonated with two of the political rationalities described in chapters one and two – victimization and strong individualism. Recall that these rationalities have accompanied the implementation of social policies influenced primarily by neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the New Right, the three major schools of thought that dominated the Republican Party of the United States before and during the time period during which *The Passion* was released.

If the political rationalities of victimization, individualism, and masculinity were central to the marketing and promotion of *The Passion of the Christ*, they are equally valuable in explaining why the film was well-received by audiences and why many who viewed the film favorably identified with it. Equally important are two other political rationalities outlined in chapter two: nationalism, masculinity. As discussed in the introduction, the power of media to affect the beliefs of individuals should not be underestimated. Specifically with regard to cinema, Kluge (in Hansen 1991:13) asserts that films are an essential tool for communicating public discourse as they facilitate the competition and intersections of various types of public life. Responses to *The Passion of the Christ* varied widely and were based in large part on the religious orientation and disposition of the individual viewing the film. While for many people, religious or cultural affiliations with the political right were established before the release of *The Passion*, this identification did not guarantee that viewers would favorably identify with the film.

According to Robin Wood (1986: 2), films are not just products of a culture, but are intricately connected with the time period during which they are produced as well as the cultural movements that produce them. Because of this cultural influence, many elements comprise a film that are beyond an artist’s control. This chapter explores the text of *The Passion of the Christ* and identifies how the film can be read as the product of the milieu of 2004 and how the political rationalities of victimization, individuality, masculinity, militarism, and nationalism, popular at that time, are embedded in the film. I start with a treatment of Gibson’s film as the most recent incarnation of the Passion play, an art form that focused on the individual suffering of Jesus, brutally victimized at the hands of others. Deploying the useful concept of intertextuality, I explore the sources that potentially inspired and influenced Gibson, focusing specifically on the observation many critics in the mainstream press made about the film: that it reminded them of a horror movie.

To fully appreciate *The Passion* in the context of the horror genre, the next part of the chapter explores the history and development of horror as a vehicle for expressing and working out social problems and anxieties. This section also includes a brief exploration of other films that can be seen as working through national traumas.

This chapter concludes with a look at *The Passion*'s Jesus and the way in which the film converges with and diverges from traditional horror conventions, including the manner in which it presents its monsters and the effect that these monsters have on the status quo. First, in *The Passion,* Jesus, who like protagonists in other horror films that feature an anguished main character, is a strong individual suffering alone, cut off from his family and friends. He is the victim of both Satan, who embodies the monstrousness of an independent feminine presence, and the Jewish leadership, who undermine Jesus, an apparent threat to the Roman Empire. Next, the Jesus of *The Passion* has been created in the image of Mel Gibson, who, as an actor on the screen, has a history of showcasing his male body in various states of torture and suffering. This masculine Jesus is a departure from the image of Jesus during an earlier historical era of the United States, and is presented as a Jesus for our time – one who will militarily respond to a country that had been attacked only three years prior to the release of the film. Finally, this masculine Jesus is the active, militarized and mobilized savior of a country fighting a two-front war. With his resurrection at the end of the film, Jesus reinforces notions of American and

Christian triumphalism. For many on the right, Jesus' suffering may be seen as the ultimate atoning vehicle for a profligate society.

THE PASSION HORROR PICTURE SHOW

Intertextuality: The Passion Play and the Horror Genre

During post-production of *The Passion of the Christ*, Peter Boyer (2003: 70) of *The New Yorker* interviewed Gibson about the making of and controversy surrounding his film. Gibson told Boyer that "his script for *The Passion* was the New Testament and that the film was directed by the Holy Ghost." Gibson went further to explain that *The Passion* was a heroic action story infused with realism. Gibson told Boyer, "I wanted to bring you there…and I wanted to be true to the Gospels. That has never been done." By claiming that his goal was to be true to the New Testament Gospels, Gibson glossed over a very significant issue. Since the New Testament accounts are sparse in their details of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, Gibson was forced to supplement much of the gospel account with material from sources other than the Bible. Cunningham (2004: 52) argues that "there is nothing wrong with supplementing the fairly sparse New Testament accounts of Christ's Passion; in fact, to create a coherent narrative, this is almost unavoidable."

What is notable is the choice of extra-biblical material that artists use to accompany the various versions of the Bible stories. Whether he chooses to acknowledge the fact, in addition to the New Testament, Gibson borrows imagery from Roman Catholicism's Stations of the Cross, scripts of other Passion plays, artwork depicting Christ's Passion, and the visions of Anna Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), an illiterate nun and mystic who claimed to be in attendance at the crucifixion, and whose visions were recorded by a poet at her bedside and published in the volume *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Boys 2004: 5). In fact, so much extra-biblical material was taken from Emmerich that Phillip Cunningham (2004: 56) was prompted to suggest that "the movie's credits should have stated: 'Based on a story by Anne Catherine Emmerich.'" What is troubling for many biblical scholars about Emmerich's version and vision of *The Passion* is not only that it diverges from biblical accounts of Christ's death, but also that it is clearly a product of its time and is steeped in a very bloody and anti-Semitic medievalism.

Gibson's film is the newest incarnation of an old religious tradition of dramatizing the death of Jesus in a form known as the Passion play (Rudin 2004: 7). While a ritual remembrance of the death of Jesus likely was an early practice of Christianity, Carroll (2004a) states that it was during the medieval period when Good Friday, the holiday on which the death of Jesus is celebrated, became the high point of the liturgical year. In terms of central importance in Christian ritual worship, this holiday replaced Easter, or the holy day that honored the resurrection of Jesus. Rudin attributes this change to the fact that, at the time, Christianity was engaged in the Crusades and locked in a holy war against Islam, causing much suffering in Europe. Thus, a suffering Jesus resonated most strongly with a war-ravaged people. In 2004, with the United States engaged in a two-front war, once again, the image of crucifixion appealed meaningfully to many Americans. Grace (2004: 14) writes that many viewers who watched *The Passion* "sobbed, thinking of the blood Jesus shed for them." Most of the strong feelings, Grace

(2004: 14) contends, were aroused because of the ancient narrative's power to speak to individuals and communities who are "suffering in any historical time period." Grace explains that, in Christian countries, "interest in the Passion – along with self flagellation in some eras - has tended to rise during times of plague, war, and other tragedies." As was discussed in chapter two, since the late 1960s, the United States' role as global financial and political leader has been in decline, and so it is not surprising that a narrative popular during times of cultural and political changes was resurrected and well-received.

Those who gave a positive review to the film included Michael Novak (2004) of *The National Review,* who argued that, "for serious Christians at least, the film occasions an overpowering religious experience of quiet, peace, and brotherly outreach." As to his own personal reaction, he wrote, "I felt personally drawn into recognition of my own responsibility for what was to come." Novak (2004) explained his feeling as coming from "the impenetrability of the ancient Aramaic language, which put me in the zone of timelessness and culturelessness, and the sudden alarming appearance of the serpentine presence and power of evil." Pat Robertson (2004), televangelizing founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network and the *700 Club*, had a similar reaction, stating that "it was an intensely personal film" and that "it was your sins, my sins that put Him through that suffering." Ramesh Ponnuru (2004), also of *The National Review*, agreed, writing that for the Christian viewer, "it is painful watching brutality and knowing that you are responsible for it, that we are all guilty of the crucifixion."

For the historical materialist, discovering how this film "spoke" to audience members involves exploring the dominant and marginalized interpretation strategies used by spectators. As part of this approach, Staiger (1992: 79) argues that one must focus on the "interaction among context, text, and individual in which a perceiver's socially and historically developed mental concepts and language may be only partially available to self-reflection and are most certainly heterogeneous." In other words, only some interpretation strategies may be obvious to audiences. The most available interpretation strategy for viewers who had a favorable impression of *The Passion of the Christ* is the view that the film is a Biblically-based adaptation of the last hours of the life of Jesus and the newest materialization of the Passion play, a strategy that reinforces Gibson's claims to have made the film based on the gospels of the New Testament or, as Cunningham suggests, by borrowing material from a meditation that is based on a biblical story.

Recalling Staiger's assertion above that only some cognitive interactions among text and context are available to the viewer, the dominant reading and response to Gibson's *Passion* should not be viewed as the only valid reading of the text. To understand how interactions that are not overtly available may cause a film text to appeal to viewers, the theory of intertextuality is quite useful. "Intertext" is a term borrowed from Bakhtin and introduced by Kristeva in the 1960s to describe the idea that every film text "forms an intersection of textual surfaces" (Stam 2000: 201). As a result, filmmakers are viewed as "orchestrating pre-existing texts and discourses" (Stam 2000: 201). This theory contends that a film text does not "stand on its own" as an independent work of art, but is influenced by, pays homage to, and quotes other film texts and genres regardless of whether the director is aware of this process.

On an overt level, Gibson's film clearly references sacred works including, but not limited to, the Bible. A less obvious, but no less important, interpretation strategy was employed by many in the mainstream media who saw *The Passion* as possessing the conventions of a horror film. When film critics for major media outlets were finally able to view *The Passion of the Christ*, their primary discussion largely departed from the pre-release concerns about anti-Semitism to a consideration of Gibson's use of violence in the film. This sentiment was widespread and included analysis from *The New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott (2004b), who described *The Passion* as shifting "from horror-movie suspense to slasher-film dread." David Denby (2004) of *The New Yorker* echoed Scott's sentiments, stating that the beginning of the movie uses the visual shorthand of "a graveyard horror flick." In his analysis, Goldstein (2004) of *The Village Voice* wrote that "the real model for this film is Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* with its relentless depictions of torture, along with every slasher movie that cloaks its intentions in a higher message." Frank Rich (2004b), cultural critic for *The New York Times*, described the movie as a joy ride for sadomasochists, while David Edelstein (2004) of the on-line magazine *Slate* viewed the film as a "two-hour-and-six-minute snuff movie and a protracted exercise in sadomasochism." According to David Ansen of *Newsweek* (2004), *The Passion* plays like "the Gospel according to the Marquis de Sade."

While these reviews could be dismissed as the mean-spirited views of critics who, as I suggested in chapter three, were demonized by Gibson during *The Passion*'s publicity and marketing campaign, these interpretations should not be discounted. To understand how Gibson may have unintentionally, but effectively, used horror conventions to depict the suffering of Jesus, it is first useful to look at the unifying theme of the horror genre. Wells (2009: 9) contends that it is more useful to identify horror texts by the themes they address than by a set of conventions to which they adhere; two themes that have primacy are overwhelming concern with death and the past, and the disruption of the status quo by a monster or group of monsters. Wood (2009: 9) agrees, arguing that while there are many subgenres of horror, the common thread among them is that they adhere to a fairly standard and simple formula: normality threatened by a monster. In the case of *The Passion*, society is filled with monsters who work to disturb and break down the status quo (Wells 2000:9). It is only through the hero, Jesus, that these monsters are defeated and the world is (hopefully) transformed into a better place.

While it is fairly obvious that Gibson did not set out intentionally to make a horror film about the final hours of Jesus' life, it is not unusual that he used the horror formula to tell the story, as have other directors of non-horror films. For example, Picart and Frank (2004: 212) explore how Steven Spielberg also employed horror themes in his movie *Schindler's List* (1995) in order to depict human suffering and in turn elicit an emotional reaction from the film's audience by drawing stark parallels between the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and the "shower scene" in *Schindler's List*. In *Schindler's List*, Spielberg's camera takes the position of a voyeur stationed above the showerhead and looking down on the female prisoners in the Auschwitz showers. In addition, the camera shots are quick and frenetic at first but eventually slow to build intensity and create a mood where the audience anticipates the death of the protagonist.

While the outcomes of *Psycho* and *Schindler's List* are different, with Marion dying (*Psycho*) and the women and girls in the concentration camp surviving their ordeal (*Schindler's List*), the use of these effects is the same: to elicit an emotional reaction from those viewing the film. Likewise for Gibson, it was important to create an emotional experience for his audience members. This goal was even stated by Gibson during a promotional interview with David Neff (2004) and Jane Johnson Struck (2004) of *Christianity Today* and *Today's Christian Woman*, respectively. Neff (2004) praised *The Passion of the Christ* for doing "a great job of showing Jesus' suffering." Gibson responded by saying, "Film, I think, is visceral. It has the power to draw you in and have you experience something on an emotional level that you may not be able logically to explain."

Emotional experience is the common element of what Williams (1991) calls the "body genres," which include horror movies, pornographic films, and women's melodramas (or "weepies"). The success of these genres, Williams (1991: 730) contends, comes from "the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on screen." What separates these genres from other genres is the sense of sensation, over-involvement, and emotion that allows the film text to manipulate the audience. In body genre films, Williams (1991: 729) argues, we see the "body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion, and a form of ecstasy where the body is beside itself with sexual pleasure, fear or terror, or overpowering sadness." It is clear that Gibson too wanted to create a visceral experience for his audience members and therefore *The Passion* fits into one of the most prominent body genres, horror.

Horror and the Audience

To understand why this film spoke to so many viewers, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the subject positions held by its audience members and supporters of the film. According to Stam (2000: 308), the left has been schizophrenic in its theorization of the mass media audience. For some Marxists, popular culture has been viewed as a site with the potential for social transformation. In other words, the media has been viewed as a tool for eliciting messages of social change that translate into action. For other thinkers, “the masses” are subjects of manipulation by the capitalist machine and its propaganda arm, the media. Stam (2002) argues that this dichotomized thinking is not particularly useful. In response, several theorists (including Kracauer, Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Adorno) have replaced it with a “dialectical approach” that views mass culture as containing “utopian strains” that often contain “the antidote to their [the masses’] own poison” (Stam 2000: 309). To explain, audiences identify with media they see offering solutions to their social problems and ideas that assuage their social anxieties. Kluge (in Hanson 1991: 13) expresses this same idea, noting that films become useful to viewers only when they in some ways “connect to the viewer’s stream of associations exploiting their needs, perceptions, and wishes.”

By adopting the position that audience members find those films with which they connect on a personal social-psychological level to be meaningful, we can go beyond seeing those who supported *The Passion of the Christ* as doing so either because they ingested a dose of religious opiate or because they see the film as a tool they can use to usher in a theocracy. Telotte (in Waller 1987: 115) observes that certain terrors confront us in horror films, pointing specifically to fears that "drive home lessons regarding our resolution of those personal and cultural problems that we are reluctant to face outside the theater." Therefore, a more useful position would be to see the film as appealing to viewers because, to them, it is a site for working out social problems and expressing societal anxieties. Additionally, *The Passion* contains kernels of a "utopian fantasy" that offers solutions to social anxieties or expresses reforms that viewers feel should be made to the status quo.

Ryan and Kellner (1988: 168) write that "during times of social crisis, several sorts of cultural representations tend to emerge." They go on to explain that some representations offer alternatives to our "distressing actuality," while others "project the worst fears and anxieties induced by the critical situation into metaphors that allow fears to be absolved or played out." Alternatively, some representations "evoke a nihilistic vision of a world without hope or remedy." Prince (2004: 4) writes that horror concerns the current zeitgeist in that it specifically speaks to "the extent that we inhabit today a culture of fear, which finds threats of decay and destruction at every turn."

As was argued in chapter two, for those on the right, the cultural changes that have taken place since the 1960s combined with the implementation of political economic neoliberal capitalist policies have fostered anxieties. For some, these worries focus on unemployment, economic change, and those citizens who are out to undermine the state by taking advantage of welfare and abortion services. These worries extend to non-citizens, who undermine the state be entering the country illegally or who are out to attack the country directly, as was the case with the 9/11 hijackers. At the time the film was released, the United States was fighting a two-front war in Iraq and Afghanistan. *The Passion of the Christ* is a cultural representation that contains two responses to social crises: it plays out these fears on the screen and also offers an alternative to reality.

THE HORROR GENRE AS AN HISTORICAL SITE FOR WORKING OUT SOCIAL ANXIETY

A Brief History of Horror

In order to better appreciate the classification of *The Passion of the Christ* as part of the horror genre, it is important to explore the concept of genre itself. Altman (1999) explains that neoclassical genre theory has traditionally understood authors and audiences as operating within specific generic categories that transcend historical situation or time. Following the Aristotelian model of describing and codifying existing practice, artists and critics viewed genres as ahistorical and pre-existing formats or formulas to which literary works, and by extension, films adhered. Altman argues that a more useful understanding of genres views them as historically grounded, but actively created, by all of the participants in the filmmaking and film viewing process: producers, directors, audiences, and critics. Since genres are historically constituted, as Altman argues, they need to be understood as constructed in a field that competes with and interacts with other genres. Because of this interaction and dynamism, films rarely embody one specific genre, but rather different generic conventions may be read into the film at different times by different groups of people. For instance, a film may be produced and directed under one set of generic expectations, marketed as fitting into several genres, and received by audience members who may perhaps read yet another set of generic conventions into the film.

Altman (1999) argues that genres should be seen as dynamic – as products of historical processes combined with the cultural milieu in which films are produced and released. In other words, genres neither have a static, unchanging essence nor always adhere to an immutable set of conventions. With Altman’s observations about the malleability of genre at the fore, it is valuable to trace the dynamic history of the horror genre, as it is one of the intertextual fields from which Gibson significantly borrowed to make *The Passion of the Christ*. Crane (1994: 24) argues that the horror genre today bears few similarities to the horror films produced eighty or even forty years ago, and that any similarities between horror during different time periods are short-lived at best. While Crane may be correct in pointing out that horror films of different periods look remarkably different from one another, almost all horror films play to their audiences’ anxieties and fears. Horror, like many other film genres, has its roots in literature and can trace its origins to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a time during which, as Ryan and Kellner (1988: 168) point out, society was adjusting to the new reality ushered in by political and industrial revolutions. During this time period, cultural representations in literature “provoked a dual process of idealization and fear.” In some literary works, nature and feelings were idealized as alternatives to the industrial world that was being built, while other works used horror and the gothic to project fears about the social changes taking place.

In terms of film specifically, Ryan and Kellner (1988: 169) observe that the first great wave of horror film emerged in 1920s Germany, another time of social change, adjustment, and anxiety. This was a time, Tybjerg (2004: 36) observes, that was marked by concerns about human nature. Film and literature of this time period featured many characters with seemingly dual personalities; for example, the character of Dr. Caligari in the seminal German film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) is both an asylum doctor and a madman. Tybjerg (2004:36), borrowing Grodal's term, describes these films as "schizoid horror" and observes that many of these films express fears that "one personality might come apart or that one might lose one's grip on reality." While some authors argue that German artists made films with these themes because German nature reflected these deep divides in personality, Tybjerg takes a more sociological or anthropological approach, noting that these films were popular with audiences because many German citizens at the time also believed in the dual nature of the human personality. In other words, because genres are, as Altman point out, malleable, the horror films of the time period resonated with audiences not because they adhered to a strict set of conventions but because the themes that they saw expressed on the screen reflected their own personal ideologies or beliefs.

According to Ryan and Kellner (1988: 170), many of the horror movies made before 1968 were either uplifting in message or else provided viewers with some sense of resolution. For example, the monster films that appeared during the Great Depression, including several incarnations of the *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* stories, featured villains who disrupted the status quo and were typically defeated, after which social order was restored. Pinedo (2004: 89) observes that many horror films released in this era shared a similar narrative structure that featured a monstrous individual or creature that disrupts the natural order. Most of the narrative action involves vain attempts to defeat the creature. Eventually, in most films, the monster is defeated by a male-driven military or scientific expertise, and order is restored. After World War II, Lowenstein (2005: 7) observes, a transition took place in the genre, where “all-too-human” threats replaced the gothic, otherworldly monsters of the previous era. While narrative structures of post-war films were similar to those of films released prior to World War II, the forces of threat in post-war films typically were not external, otherworldly monsters but rather metaphors for community disruptions, including the Red threat and rebellious teenagers (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 170). These threats reflected the social tensions caused by the Red Scare that caused neighbors and co-workers to be suspicious of one another in an effort to root out domestic communist threats (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 170). Ryan and Kellner (1988: 170) contend that during the 1950s and 1960s, films in general, and horror films in particular, reflected idealizations about the family, the male hero, and military power. Social confidence in traditional institutions was reinforced when these institutions defeated monstrous presences on screen.

1968: The Year the World (and the Screen) Changed

Waller (1987: 4) views 1968 as a pivotal year for the development of the modern horror movie. The meaning of the monstrous was redefined when, as Waller (1987: 4) argues, horror became situated “in the everyday world of contemporary America.” Recall from chapter two the significance of the late 1960s and early 1970s for global social change. With the United States facing a decisive defeat in Vietnam, economic decline, and the implementation of liberal social policies, changes took place on the screen, as well. Waller (1987) argues that, after 1968, horror films were extended dramatizations of responses to the major public events and newsworthy topics in American history since 1968, including the following: the United State's loss of sole superpower status; fluctuations in key economic indicators such as the interest rate; attempts to redirect domestic and foreign policy; the Watergate scandal; the slow withdrawal from Vietnam; oil shortages; the Iranian hostage crisis; the rise of the New Right and the Moral Majority; and the continuing debate over abortion, military spending, and women's rights (Waller 1987: 12). Ryan and Kellner (1988: 170) echo Waller, observing that at this time, it was through the horror genre "that some of the crucial anxieties, tensions, and fears generated by these changes, especially feminism, economic crisis and political liberalism [were] played out."

While horror films made after 1968 were similar to films of earlier eras in that they spoke to anxieties created by social life, post-1968 films are overall quite different in their response to the social issues of the time. Ryan and Kellner contend that films made after 1968 introduced a higher degree of pessimism and nihilism than previously seen in the genre. Pinedo (2004) argues that this negative outlook overwhelmingly reflected an uncertain world "in which good and evil, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion become virtually indistinguishable." Modleski (1986: 769) similarly observes that horror films from 1968 onward are open-ended texts that do not give audiences closure, and are marked by the minimization or dramatic under-development of plot and character (once thought to be essential to good story-telling). In addition, these films feature victims and villains who both lack depth and are portrayed unsympathetically, making it difficult for audiences to identify with them. If horror films of the late modern era have created a world of uncertainty, this is because filmmakers envision a world where good and evil collapse into one another and where it is increasingly difficult to tell the difference between victim and villain. Crane (1994) gives an insightful example of this in an analysis of the *Friday the 13th* series. Crane argues that in these films, individuals who are good receive the same punishment as characters who are bad, indicating that one's behavior has little to do with the rewards and punishments one receives. As will be discussed below, in *The Passion of the Christ,* Gibson departs from the post-1968 message by creating a horror film where characters are clearly designated as good or evil with the latter becoming recipients of well-deserved punishments.

Another significant shift took place during this era, as the suggested mayhem or implied disruption of earlier films was replaced with depictions of graphic violence (Lowenstein 2005:7). While violent acts reflect the increased social anxiety of the late 1960s, the human body would not have been subjected to never-before-seen tortures had it not been for the adoption of the "Industry Code of Self-Regulation" in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America. The Code, which was instituted in response to the public concern over censorship in the media, replaced the Hays production code put in place in the 1930s. Ryan and Kellner (1988: 6) argue that the Self-Regulation code helped shape modern motion pictures, as it "made it possible to deal with previously forbidden subject matter." Waller (1987) points out that with the implementation of the production code, horror, for the most part, became an "R-rated" genre:

> … the MPAA R-rating has allowed for and perhaps even legitimized the presentation of explicit violence – the violence of decapitation and dismemberment, of needles to the eyeball, and of scissors, kitchen appliances, hand tools, and shish kabob skewers as deadly weapons. (P. 5)

Waller (1987: 5), who is hesitant to list conventions or characteristics that define the "essence of modern horror," does make one exception: violence. The presence of violence on the screen, Williams (1991: 736) argues, should not be discounted, overlooked, or dismissed, but viewed as a valuable method of cultural problem solving. The violence used in modern horror films, Waller (1987: 7) contends, forces viewers to confront their beliefs about the meaning of "self-defense, vengeance, and justified violence." In addition to having to think about the uses of violence, viewers of violence in film are asked to confront their ideas about "uncommon 'masculine' valor and all-too-common female victimization." While the presence of violence within the narrative forces the viewer to consider meanings of the masculine and feminine, the violence that takes place in horror films, according to Ryan and Kellner (1988: 168), also needs to be taken quite seriously, as it is situated "within a broad cultural system that includes the representations and socialization patterns central to both the military and the capitalist economy." Violence is the central language of *The Passion of the Christ* and is used in a two-fold capacity: first, violence is deployed by those monstrous and monstrous people surrounding Jesus, which emphasizes the sinfulness of the world; and secondly, violence is used by Jesus to redeem the world and transform it into a better place.

Horror and National Trauma

Even with its emphasis on monsters and violence, *The Passion of the Christ* does not fit cleanly into the horror film category. However, as has been argued above, the horror genre is a malleable and dynamic genre, and, when worked into the intertext of *The Passion*, provides the film with the flexibility to address a variety of themes. Therefore, it is important to look at the ways in which horror conventions can be employed to effectively communicate to an audience. Biblical scholar William Telford (1997: 125) argues that one of the greatest challenges for filmmakers who portray the life of Jesus is to make a film that is both historical and contemporary – to present a subject that bridges the gap between the first-century world and our own. It is primarily through the use of violence and the strategic placement of monsters – specifically the feminine Satan character, and her nemesis, the hyper-masculine hero, Jesus – that Gibson is able to connect the past to the present and speak to the current national trauma as perceived by those on the right. Lowenstein (2005) contends that to understand historical trauma, one must recognize specific historical events as creating societal wounds. Film is a tool that elucidates these wounds, the recovery from which, Lowenstein explains, is a two-fold process that involves replaying or remembering the traumatic event as well as creating psychological distance between the event and the community. By looking at films that, like *The Passion of the Christ*, do not cleanly and cleanly fit in the horror genre – including *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), *Peeping Tom* (1960), *Onibaba* (1964), and *Last House on the Left* (1972) – Lowenstein (2005: 9) shows how certain films simultaneously connect audiences with the historical trauma while absolving them of responsibility for the trauma. Similar to *The Passion*, all of the films that Lowenstein analyzes fit into the category of modern horror, which he contends is a uniquely American phenomenon exhibiting an obsession with shocking deaths and increasing doses of gore.

The most important consideration for Lowenstein is not how films use horror conventions, but rather how films "access discourses of horror to confront the representation of historical trauma tied to the film's national and cultural context." For example, Lowenstein reads *Eyes without a Face* as reflective of the French national audience's experiences with the Holocaust and the Algerian war. While elements like Joseph Mengele-style surgical experiments and overtones of torture allude to episodes in national history, they do not present one-to-one allegories. Rather, they seek to engage with history as a "complicated force to be struggled with by the audience." Horrific episodes, according to horror writer Stephen King (in Schechter 2001: 25-26) can be divided into two main categories that give expression to two different types of terror: the mythic fairy-tale, which confronts us with social taboos, and the socio-political, which manifests political, economic, and cultural fears. With its deployment of intense violence and other horrific elements, *The Passion of the Christ* should be viewed at least in part, as a horror film that addresses the trauma experienced by those on the right. Unlike Lowenstein, who connects films to specific and singular traumatic national events, I argue that *The Passion*, which almost exclusively focuses on the death of Jesus, should be read as a requiem for conservative culture, which waned after the cultural revolution(s) of the 1960s. The result of these revolutions, as perceived by the right, granted rights and protections (viewed as privileges) to women and minorities and, by extension, strengthened the welfare state, undermined the free market and the economy, and led to a decrease in America’s power and influence around the world. The deterioration of conservative culture was later punctuated by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The neoconservative militaristic response against Afghanistan and later Iraq should be seen, in part, as a desperate efforts to deploy extreme violence in the service of returning the United States to the role of sole global superpower, or hegemon. A careful reading of *The Passion of the Christ* reveals both the social anxieties of the right during the time period during which it was written (likely not long after September 11), produced, marketed, and released, as well as a solution, rooted in masculinity and militarism, for these perceived social problems. These anxieties, discussed above, are made manifest primarily though the presence of monsters and the portrayal of extreme violence on screen.

MONSTERS, VIOLENCE, AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE NEO-LIBERAL INDIVIDUAL

Monsters, the Status Quo, and Political Rationalities

As mentioned above, it is unimportant to discuss whether Gibson intentionally or unintentionally used horror conventions to make *The Passion of the Christ*. The fact that these conventions exist in the film speak to the fact that Gibson wished to elicit an emotional response from his audience members. One of the most prominent conventions used in *The Passion* that is found in most other horror films is the presence of both human and non-human monsters. Unlike Waller, who is hesitant to list or name specific conventions that are present in horror films, Wells (2000) argues that at the heart of the horror film is a monster or a monstrous presence that works to disrupt the *status quo*. These monsters range from specific villains, such as Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, to evil presences that possess others, such as those found in *Rosemary's Baby*. Waller adds that the monstrous is a necessary presence in horror as it acts as the agent that disrupts the narrative.

Like Wells, Tybjerg (2004: 16) agrees that monsters are a defining characteristic of the horror genre, most importantly in that they represent something larger than the presence of evil or suffering in the world. Ryan and Kellner (1988: 179) contend that monsters work most effectively if they are used to draw attention to "particularly monstrous aspects of normal society." While some monsters, Waller (1987) explains, are willfully, irredeemably evil, others are "somehow beyond or beneath good and evil." Through horror, Freeland (2000: 3) argues, audience members are invited to work out their anxieties and questions about the nature of these monsters and, by extension, the meaning of evil in the world. In fact, Freeland contends, the most successful horror films elicit strong emotions, especially fear, dread, or disgust, while provoking "*thoughts* about evil in its many varieties and degrees: internal or external, limited or profound, physical or mental, natural or supernatural, conquerable or triumphant" (Freeland 2000: 14).

Ryan and Kellner (1988: 179) agree, arguing that monster figures are often used to affirm the social order by representing threats to normality that are eventually purged. Wood (1986) notes that while the monster or monstrous presence is found in most horror films, the nature and meaning of the monstrous has changed over time. During the 1970s, Wood observes, "Society appeared to be in an advanced state of disintegration" without a viable alternative for rebuilding or restructuring the social world. The monsters that appeared on screen in the 1970s reflected this social zeitgeist and were overall sympathetic creatures who had some human characteristics with which the audience could identify and sympathize. This sympathetic posture, Wood argues, reveals the relationship that the audience had with normalcy in the 1970s – since society was seen as being in a state of decay, audiences identified with the monster, who disrupted the sense of normalcy, as much as the protagonist who represented the *status quo*.

Wood (1986) observes a shift in the 1980s in the depiction of the monstrous, which he connects to the reactionary movement that emerged in the culture during that time period. Monsters in the 1980s were marked by simply being evil and destructive without explanation and were at times shown in opposition to Christianity, giving the protagonist/monster relationship the weight of good versus evil. Two popular motifs in horror that Wood (1986) observed during this time period were violence against women and violence against teenagers. In horror films of this period, teenagers were often punished for being promiscuous while women were punished for "being women" and resisting "definition within the virgin/wife/mother framework" (Wood 1986: 197).

According to Wood (1986), because society was seen as disintegrating, the monsters shown on the screen in the 1970s were sympathetic. With the reactionary politics of the 1980s, the monsters were shown as inexplicably evil and forces that must be destroyed in order for society to return to the *status quo*. What is striking about *The Passion of the Christ* is the inversion of the monster- *status quo* relationship. In *The Passion*, monsters do not disrupt the normality of the *status quo*, but rather monsters, like

Judas, Satan, the Roman soldiers, and the Jewish priests and temple guards, *are* the *status quo*, which makes the world itself (controlled by monsters) a frightening and evil place. Grodal (in Freeland 2000: 9) argues that monsters, in addition to changing the world as people know it, inflict pain and fear by speaking to our cognitive loss of control in a "universe where rational explanations no longer make sense." While Grodal's observation is correct, what we find in *The Passion* is another inversion of the traditional horror narrative. In traditional horror films, monsters disrupt the *status quo* and do so (at least since 1968) without reason or rational explanation. In *The Passion of the Christ*, monsters seem to control the world for most of the narrative with the express purpose and intent of ridding the world of Jesus by systematically inflicting pain and violence on him. With the exception of a small number of people, including his mother and friends, Jesus acts as the presence of good in a hostile world where evil is an overwhelming force. Finally, unlike the modern horror film, *The Passion* offers a satisfying ending: good triumphs over evil and order returns to the universe.

Certainly in the 1970s and 1980s, as in 2004, the world was also seen as a place of crisis, but the treatment of monsters reveals how the view of the world has changed since that time. According to Wood (1986: 50), during the 1970s, the world was perceived as being in disarray with "no serious possibility of the emergence of a coherent and comprehensive alternative." Reflecting this dominant worldview, the monsters presented on the horror screen in the 1970s were sympathetic as they presented an alternative model of society, a model that was neither fully accepted nor fully dismissed by dominant culture. By contrast, the monsters of the 1980s reflected the wave of reactionary politics sweeping the nation. These monsters tended to be unsympathetic, evil, and disruptive of the *status quo*. Once defeated, though, there was hope that the world would return to a state of normalcy. Recall from chapter two that, for those on the right, the world of 2004, when *The Passion* was released, was, like the 1980s, a world in crisis. With the hegemonic influence of the United States waning, its free-market capitalistic policies becoming increasingly problematic, and its being overtaken by a culture that was perceived as more and more hostile to conservative views, the right perceived the world (like the world of Jesus that Gibson creates in the film) as an antagonistic and evil place. Unlike the monsters of the 1970s or 1980s, which are a singular presence and have the potential to be defeated, the world of *The Passion of the Christ* is itself monstrous and can be redeemed only by a new world order ushered in by only the protagonist. This antagonistic worldview is reflective of Gibson's own perception of the world. When asked by interviewers from *Christianity Today* if he thought there were spiritual forces resisting his making of *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson said, "Oh, of course. But that's the big picture, isn't it? The big realms are slugging it out. We're just the meat in the sandwich. And for some reason we're worth it. I don't know why, but we are" (Neff and Struck 2004).

Like traditional horror films, *The Passion of the Christ* is filled with monsters who speak to particular anxieties that existed within those on the right in 2004. These monsters include the following: Judas, a disciple in Jesus' inner circle, who betrays him; the Jewish priests and guards who arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and administer punishment; the Roman soldiers who beat Jesus mercilessly and ultimately cause his death; and Jesus' main nemesis, Satan. While all of the male monsters cause harm to Jesus, in Gibson's *Passion*, it is actually a feminine presence who orchestrates the horror that Jesus must endure. The representation of a strong and independent female who wants to undermine the social order that men have created strongly aligns with the right-wing, anti-feminist rhetoric described in chapter two.

The Monstrous Feminine

Reading the New Testament accounts of the crucifixion story, upon which Gibson claims to have based his script for *The Passion*, reveals an important absence. Not once is the feminized Satan creature that Gibson includes in his script mentioned in these gospel accounts. While Satan tempts Jesus earlier in his life during his forty days in the desert, she is not present in the crucifixion accounts. Notably, in their reviews or commentaries on the film, no conservative or Christian writers took issue with the inclusion of this character. The presence of the Satan character and the central role that she plays in Gibson's version of events are more than an example of simple artistic or creative license. Rather, the addition of Satan speaks to many of the right's anxieties about the roles of strong independent women in society and the mounting attacks of feminism (Hardisty 1991: 17). Significantly, horror has often functioned as a site to work out these same anxieties about women's independence in a world dominated by men (Waller 1987: 5). The expression of the anxiety over a powerful female presence is not new. In her exploration of horror and literature, Kristeva (1982) shows how the male-female dichotomy often parallels the normality-abjection dichotomy with the monstrous feminine representing the abject. Further, in religion, the female is often associated with the abject and due to this, must be cleansed. If purification is not possible, then the female presence must be eliminated. Creed (1993: 7), who explores the presence of the abject in the form of the monstrous feminine in horror films, argues, similarly to Kristeva, that the female monster in horror is often an active presence, not a passive figure or victim. Essentially, the narrative structure of the horror film requires that the female monster be eliminated in order for society to return to a sense of normalcy.

The primary monster in *The Passion of the Christ* is Satan, who certainly should be viewed as an incarnation of the monstrous feminine. In most modern English translations of the Bible, Satan is referred to with a masculine pronoun. In Gibson's telling of the Passion story, however, Satan, who is played by a female actor, is pale-faced, hairless, and slight in stature; only her deep voice suggests a degree of sex-ambiguity. She serves as the double, or female counterpart, to a hairy, burly, and masculine Jesus. Kristeva (1982: 17) argues many religions have included defilement rites particularly as they related to women's menstrual cycle and purity. While these do exist in some congregations today, they are not society-wide practices. According to Creed (1993: 13), the central ideological project of the horror film has become to accomplish what religion no longer can: purifying the abject. Since in *The Passion of the Christ,* Satan is not only responsible for disrupting the *status quo* but also represents the abject, she must be at the least purified and at the most destroyed.

We are introduced to Satan at the very beginning of the film, when Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night sky lit by a full moon. This introduction suggests that the conflict in the film extends beyond our universe. When the camera pans down, we see Jesus praying, accompanied by the sounds of chirping crickets, drums, and rattles, alerting us to a serpentine presence. Next, we hear a voice, in Aramaic, asking, “Do you really believe that one man can bear the full burden of sin?” In contrast to the pain and edge that we hear in Jesus’ voice, Satan’s voice is calm and smooth, both repulsive and beautiful. Before we are given an opportunity to view Satan, we once again see the moon-filled sky and then Jesus, shaking and saying, “Shelter me O Lord. I trust in You. In You I take refuge.” Significantly, Jesus is the only individual in the film who is able to see Satan, whom we later see tormenting Judas, looking over the shoulders of the Jewish guards, and monitoring the action of the Roman soldiers. The presence of both a supernatural villain and Jesus, who communicates with God, saying “Your will be done,” demonstrates that the conflict between Jesus and Satan exists in an other-worldly realm: good versus evil, Jesus versus Satan, masculine versus feminine. In *The Passion of the Christ*, Satan goes beyond displaying independence and functioning as Jesus’ nemesis and opposite. Kristeva (1982: 42) contends that with the advent of the Garden of Eden myth, which explains humankind’s fall from grace as perpetrated by a woman, the feminine has been constructed as “a diabolical otherness in relation to the divine.” Sin is seen as motivated from within, which, according to Creed (1993), signals that women are deceptive and treacherous even while appearing pure and beautiful. In *The Passion*, Satan appears to orchestrate the monstrous acts that others commit against Jesus. This aspect of Satan certainly speaks to the reactionary anxiety that when women are permitted to act independently and function outside of the patriarchal structure, they will use their agency for destructive purposes. After the opening scene, the next time we see

Satan’s presence is after Jesus has been arrested by the Jewish temple guards and is hanging belly-down, an inch from the ground after being dropped over the side of a city wall. It is here Jesus sees Judas sitting against the wall. After making eye-contact with Judas, Jesus is hoisted back up to the top of the wall to join the guards. As Jesus is being lifted, Judas gestures as if he wishes to talk to Jesus and apologize. However, as he is about to speak, an animated demonic presence, likely under the control of Satan, comes out of the wall to frighten Judas back into silence. Determined to right his betrayal, Judas returns to the temple after Jesus has publicly been accused of blasphemy and pleads with the guards to release Jesus. Teary-eyed, he holds out the coin pouch that the priests had given him earlier in payment for revealing Jesus’ location. Frustrated at their unwillingness to reconsider, Judas throws the bag of money at Ciaphas, the High Priest, and then leaves. Judas has been stripped of whatever little agency he had and is shown as a pawn in a game much larger than himself. From the beginning of the film, when we see Jesus writhing in pain, Satan appears to be orchestrating the difficulty that Jesus endures; however, it is important to realize that, despite Satan’s seeming power, Jesus always maintains control. This is evident in the first scene in the Garden, when Jesus and Satan are together. Satan releases a snake to harm Jesus, who kills it by smashing its head with his sandal.

Immediately after Judas fails to seek Jesus’ verbal forgiveness for his betrayal, we see Judas sitting against another city wall. Two boys, playing in the street with a ball, ask Judas if he is all right and if they can help them. He tells the boys to leave him alone and calls the boys “Satans.” The boys then surmise that, because Judas is cursing, he himself is cursed, and as Judas grabs the boys by the arms, their faces wrinkle and teeth become pointed, and the eye of the taller boy rolls to one side. In the last moments of his life, Judas is pursued by the demonic children when he is chased up a hill and tormented by a crowd of boys. As he stumbles, the children push him down, tear at his clothes, and shout at him. To drown out the boys, Judas puts his hands over his ears, closes his eyes, and screams. As he screams, the boys disappear without any apparent explanation or motivation. These boys are not acting on their own accord, because in the middle of the crowd we see Satan staring at Judas. Gibson's willingness to implicate children as evil and working under the influence of Satan communicates a belief that no one is innocent or beyond implication in the fight between good and evil. In fact, it is only when these children are acting under the presence of this independent, feminine character that they are willing to commit atrocities. Moreover, the faces of the boys who chase Judas up the hill are similar to that of the demonic baby whom Satan holds at the end of the courtyard flogging scene.

In her exploration of reproduction in horror films, Creed (1993: 45) observes that when women reproduce and give birth in horror films and do so without men, they are incapable of producing complete human beings but rather can only create monsters. While the baby that Satan is holding at first looks like a normal infant, upon closer inspection, we see that it is larger than a normal baby and has a hairy back and arms, a wrinkled face, and a full-toothed smile. By holding this evil infant, Satan mocks the Madonna-child relationship of Mary and Jesus. According to Christian tradition, Mary is the only woman who is capable of Immaculate Conception, or virginal birth. This is the case only because she is impregnated by God, who, at least in *The Passion*'s version of events, is a male father figure. Satan, the powerful female figure, is also capable of reproduction, but without a male partner, she is able to create only a monster. By carrying this monster man-child, Satan mocks the innocence and purity of the child Jesus and his virgin mother Mary. This baby, cradled by its evil mother, certainly evokes anxiety and disgust and sets up a situation in which wrong must be righted.

As noted above, in the midst of torturing Judas, the boys inexplicably disappear, leaving Judas alone. However, he does not get the relief he desires, but rather turns to see an animal head carcass rotting in the sun. Judas shakes, cries, and facing what is made to seem like the inevitable, fashions a noose out of the bridle that was on the animal's face and hangs himself from a dead tree. The scene ends with Judas's joining the animal and tree in death, as his body swings from a low-hanging branch. Thus, Judas can be placed in the same category as the children, an innocent who should not be viewed as acting independently but rather as an extension or a minion of Satan. Gibson's inclusion and portrayal of Satan parallel the anxieties that many conservatives feel about the independence of women and the destructive growth of feminism in the Unites States, both of which run counter to the pro-nuclear family goals of the Religious Right. Additionally, single women who are mothers, especially minority women, are seen as taking undue advantage of the welfare state and, by extension, undermining the strength of the nation. Just as the female Satan character in *The Passion* is given too much power and authority to control others and to undermine Jesus, females who exhibit too much independence, as illustrated in chapter two, are seen as the genesis of a variety of social and cultural problems. Recall Stam's (2002) argument that mass culture, in addition to presenting the host of social problems the audiences perceive as contemporaneously occurring, contains "utopian strains" or "the antidote to their [the masses'] own poison" (Stam 2000: 309). In addition to *The Passion* making the argument that women have too much power in society, it also presents a solution: domination and dominion by a strong masculine presence. At the end of *The Passion*, after Jesus has been crucified, the revenge sequence begins: we see Satan screaming and writhing in anger as Jesus binds her to hell.

Monstrous Religion

As mentioned above, two other groups that should be seen as coming under the presence of Satan, or the monstrous feminine presence in the film, are the Jewish guards and priests. In 1988, the Bishop's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops drafted and adopted a "Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion." This document was drafted as a corrective to what Isaac (1964) termed the "teaching of contempt" within Christian churches, particularly Catholic churches, that have reinforced three complementary, yet inaccurate, ideas concerning the Jewish people: the Jews, as a collective group of people, were responsible for the death of Jesus; Judaism was in a degenerate state at the time of Jesus; and, because they rejected Jesus as Messiah, the Jews have been dispersed as punishment from God. Isaac and others[4] show how these ideas have been institutionalized in Christian teachings and used against the Jews often to justify mistreatment. While the "teaching of contempt" cannot be pointed to as the primary motivation for the *Shoah* that took place against the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazi party during World War II, a strong argument can be made that implicates this teaching as justification for the mistreatment and killing of Jewish individuals. As Perry and Schweitzer (2004: 5) argue, "the definition of the Jew as an alien other embodying pure evil predated Nazism and was a core view of Christianity for centuries."

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[4] For the most recent exploration of "the teaching of contempt" see the documentary *Sister Rose's Passion*., Peter LaDonne, 2004.

In light of the atrocities that took place during World War II, the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations reconsidered their teachings about the Jewish people. For example, George Smiga (2004: 55) points out that "one of the lasting achievements of Vatican II was its repudiation of the claim that the Jewish people were responsible for Jesus' death." Perhaps because of this repudiation, many scholars and critics spoke out quite loudly when the 1950 version of the Oberammergau Passion play was nearly identical to the 1935 version (Rudin 2004: 98). Rudin explains, "Under attack were the Oberammergau Passion play's script, music, costumes, and staging, all of which, critics charged, transmitted a toxic and inaccurate picture of Jews and Judaism." The continual outcry over depictions of Jews in the Oberammergau Passion play led to significant revisions in the 2000 production. These changes were made in spite of great resistance. In an opinion piece submitted to the *Los Angeles Times* in June of 2003, Rabbi Marvin Hier and Harold Brackman, a historian, both associated with the Simon Weisenthal Center, expressed their concerns with Gibson and the movie, stating, "In a world where the Oberammergau Passion play, a notoriously anti-Semitic presentation held every 10 years in Bavaria, is finally being toned down, it is ironic that we now have to be concerned about a possible revival of anti-Semitism in Hollywood." The lesson we should take away from Oberammergau is that the choice to use the death of Jesus as the subject of an artistic work demands attention to the historical consequences of Passion plays and historical scholarship about the life and person of Jesus.

In their "Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion," the Council of Catholic Bishops asks that every effort be made to acknowledge the Jewish roots of Christianity. Importantly, this means deliberately framing the life of Jesus in its Jewish context. First, the Council argues that in dramatizations of the life of Jesus, Jesus should not be depicted as opposing "the Law," or the Jewish teachings of his time. In a similar vein, Jesus and his disciples should not be shown in opposition to the Jews, as Jesus "was and always will remain a Jew" (Bishop's Committee 1988: 77). Specifically, the Council asks that steps be taken not to show Jesus and his teaching in opposition to "the Pharisees." Gibson gave very little, if any, regard to the guidelines set by the Bishop's Council. Indeed, Gibson's adherence to the fundamentalist philosophies of traditional Catholicism may account for why many of the discussions about historical scholarship and anti-Semitism that have taken place in scholarly and theological circles were lost on him. Commenting on scholarly interpretations of the Bible, Gibson stated: "They always dick around with it, you know? Judas is some kind of friend of some freedom fighter named Barabbas, you know what I mean? It's horseshit. It's revisionist bullshit…It was like they [the Ad Hoc Scholar Committee] were more or less saying I have no right to interpret the Gospels myself, because I don't have a bunch of letters after my name. But they are for children, these Gospels. They're for children, they're for old people, they're for everybody in between. They're not necessarily for academics. Just get an academic on board if you want to pervert something" (Boyer 2003: 66).

The scholars that Gibson specifically refers to are an ecumenical ad-hoc committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) made up of Eugene Korn of the Anti-Defamation League, Eugene Fisher, the associate director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious affairs for the USCCB, six New Testament scholars (four Catholic and two Jewish), and a historical-Jesus scholar (Boyer 2003: 64; Fredriksen 2003b). This committee evaluated Gibson's script before the film was released. These scholars (USCCB 2004: 233) point out that in Gibson's account of the Passion, Jesus is not shown as celebrating Passover, as would have been the custom. Additionally, the scholars argue that in *The Passion of the Christ*, "viewers learn virtually nothing about the ministry of Jesus, of his preaching and teaching about God's reign, his distinctive table companionship, his meditation of God's gracious mercy." In their recommendations for revisions to *The Passion* script, the scholars suggest that Jesus' death directly relate to his ministry on earth on behalf of the reign of God. Indeed, they argue that Jesus should be portrayed as a model of faith who foresaw his own suffering as contributing to the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. Unfortunately, Gibson did not take any of these suggestions under advisement. Rather, like his revenge-minded Jesus, Gibson responded to his critics and detractors with open hostility.

Cunningham (2004: 53) points out that while the synoptic Gospels (not John) describe the men who arrest Jesus in the Garden as Jews, no Biblical writers describe them as soldiers. As mentioned above, after he is seized by the Jewish guards, Jesus is shackled and heavy chains are placed around his neck. Even though Jesus peacefully surrenders to the guards, they beat him with chains and laugh as he is being taken to the temple to stand in front of the high priests. During one episode, he is slapped so hard that he falls off of the wall that he and the guards are walking on. He is saved from hitting the ground as the soldiers pull back on the chains breaking his fall.

During the scene in the temple, Jesus is accused of undermining the Jewish faith and of curing people with the help of devils. After Jesus tells the priests that he is "I AM," a reference to God, he is backhanded and spat upon by one priest and punched in the face by a temple guard. The priests then leave and Jesus is repeatedly punched and kicked by the temple guards until he falls on his knees. When asked who he is by the Jewish High Priest, Caiaphas, Jesus is struck with such a blow that it knocks him to the ground. The Jewish priests each take a turn slapping Jesus and spitting in his face. The crowd then accosts Jesus, throwing him on the floor. All of this punishment happens even before Jesus is turned over to the Roman authorities for his crucifixion punishment. The Jewish temple priests are, as the Ad Hoc Committee of the United States Bishop's Council (2004: 233) (convened to evaluate Gibson's script) states, "one dimensional bad guys" whose pathos seems driven by nothing other than Satan-influenced evil and violence.

In addition to the actions described above, we are given visual cues affirming the evil nature of the Jews in *The Passion*. For example, the scene with Jesus in the Garden is shot in shades of blue and grey, which suggest an eerie peacefulness and the presence of supernatural activity. By stark contrast, the scenes that take place in the Jewish temple are shot in assaultive bright golds and oranges. Further, when the high priests are in a frame, fire is prominently and brightly burning in the background. When Jesus and his disciples, his mother, or Mary Magdalene are in a shot in the very same temple setting, fire may be found, but it does not occupy a position of prominence. Indeed, in later scenes in the very same temple where the priests hold court with Jesus, we find Mary and Mary Magdalene shot in softer, almost hagiographic hues. While fire can symbolize purity, a more plausible reading would have it reinforce the evil traditionally associated with Satan and hell, Satan's dwelling place.

Cunningham (2004: 53) draws our attention to the scene in *The Passion* where Jesus is brought before Pilate, the Roman governor in charge of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death, and the high priests, Caiaphus and Annas, who have accused Jesus of committing several religious and civic infractions. Cunningham (2004: 54) points out that earlier in the film, before Jesus is brought before him, Pilate verbalizes a fear that if he does not agree to carry out Jesus' crucifixion, Caiaphas will lead a revolt. This detail is both extra-biblical and not historically accurate. The result of this decision on Gibson's part gives the Jewish high priests more power, authority, and agency than historically was the case. While Pilate technically had the power to sentence people to death, Gibson shows a softer, more philosophical Pilate who asks questions such as, "What is truth?", and whose hands are essentially tied when it comes to dealing with Jewish leaders. Cunningham points out that Gibson "totally reverses the relationship of

Pilate and Caiaphas." The consequence of this decision, according to Cunningham (2004: 57), is that the blame for Jesus' execution is placed squarely on the Jews.

In his essay about Jews as the scourgers of Jesus in late-Medieval Passion plays, Heintzelman (2004: 97) argues that Passion plays must be read as social documents from which can be determined "the means by which dramatists played upon the emotions and anxieties of their respective audiences." According to Heintzelman (2004: 98), recent scholarship has shown that historically large-scale Passion productions had the effect of culturally, socially, and politically isolating Jewish people from their surroundings. Shohat and Stam (1994: 215) echo Heintzelman by asking viewers to look beyond how individual characters are stereotyped to examine the underlying discourses that are reinforced by the use of stereotypes. What we see in *The Passion* are Jews who are working behind the scenes and using their influence to undermine Jesus and, by extension, early Christianity. Jews are also shown as undermining the Roman state, a portrayal that should not be dismissed or taken lightly. Indeed, showing Jews behind the scenes influencing decisions made by state leaders could fuel the anxiety that there are those who hold illegitimate power and authority over the state and are interested in the demise of the nation. In the scene where Jesus is being brought before Pilate, the Jewish people in the crowd are shown as uncontrollable and unreasonable – asking to have Barabbas released into the crowd with some shaking their fists in the air in victory as the murderer is handed over to them.

In their evaluation of how racial and ethnic stereotypes are used in film, Shohat and Stam (1994: 198) note that stereotypes function as a social control mechanism that predisposes individuals to certain expectations. Indeed, Gibson's portrayal of the Jewish high priests can be viewed as reinforcing social and cultural ideas made famous in the historically false and highly anti-Semitic pamphlet *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. While pockets of individuals who subscribe to anti-Semitic beliefs exist in the United States, in 2004, most on the right viewed the larger threat to the state as coming from those who were perceived as attempting to undermine both the Christian and democratic values that the United States stands for, those who attacked the country on September 11, 2001. Recall that in 2004, aside from feeling that the nation had been internally compromised by the powerful female presence described above, many on the right in the United States felt under siege, or victimized, by a seemingly powerful external religious presence – fundamentalist Islam. They viewed the United States as justified in leading the world, unilaterally if need be, in advancing the cause of liberal democracy (and, by extension, free markets and, for some, Christianity). Indeed, Islamic fundamentalists were viewed by American conservatives as the most acute threat to the Western world in 2004.

Recall once again Stam's assessment that films that exhibit social problems often contain solutions to these problems. Paralleling the United States' government response to the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan, the Jesus of *The Passion* does not completely destroy those adherents to the faith, but significantly undermines the Jewish religious establishment by destroying the temple, a violent and unilateral militaristic response. The United Sates followed a similar unilateralist strategy of regime change and militaristic democracy promotion in the Middle East that became two of the core tenets that

President George W. Bush advanced to justify the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. This political rationality of unilateral militarism became the zeitgeist for a strong right-wing nationalism that was seen as a justifiable response to the victimization felt by many conservatives.

Violence, Victimization, and Masculinity

For some, the Jesus of *The Passion of the Christ* seemed like little more than another manifestation of Gibson's obsession with torture and suffering. Peter Boyer of *The New Yorker* (2004: 60) observes that "violence is Gibson's natural film language, and his Jesus is unsparingly pummeled, flayed, kicked, and otherwise smitten from first to last." Reacting to Gibson's use of violence in the film, Christian author Steve Beard (2004) describes *The Passion of the Christ* as "the most sadistic and simultaneously holy thing I have seen." Pat Robertson admits that the movie is violent, but points to the fact that, historically, Jesus was badly brutalized. Likewise, Peter Chattaway (2004) of *Christianity Today* praises Gibson's use of violence as useful for highlighting the humanity of Jesus, but criticizes the film for focusing too much on violence and not going beyond "the depiction of human and demonic cruelty." Denby (2004) reminds his readers that "Gibson, as an actor, has been beaten, mashed, and disemboweled in many of his movies" and contends that, with *The Passion*, his obsession with pain seems to have reached its apotheosis. The film critic Roger Ebert (2004) notes that "The MPAA's R rating [given to *The Passion*] is definitive proof that the organization either will never give the NC-17 rating for violence or was intimidated by the subject matter. If it would have been anyone other than Jesus up on that cross, I have a feeling that NC-17 would have been an automatic." Joe Morganstern (2004), writing for *The Wall Street Journal,* argues that the violence in *The Passion* is so extreme that if the film were another genre, the level of violence in this film would be branded as pornographic.

When asked why *The Passion* so graphically depicts Jesus' suffering, Gibson said that he was careful to make the violence "bearable, just bearable," so the viewer was pushed over the edge "to get to a higher plane to something, through pain" (Stanley 2004). The violence in *The Passion* also functions as a site where groups work out their anxieties about the social world. "Taken as a whole," Waller (1987: 7) writes, horror is "an unsystematic, unresolved exploration of violence, in virtually all its forms and guises." Gibson's filmic history certainly seems to reveal an obsession with violence.

Two years before the release of *The Passion,* J. Brown (2002) looked at films that starred Mel Gibson, such as the *Lethal Weapon* series, *Braveheart*, and *Payback*, observing that in these films Gibson establishes a masculinity where real men show their strength through suffering. Given his filmic history, it was not surprising to many critics that Gibson's *Passion* reflected at the least a fascination and at worst an obsession with violence. Edelstein (2004) notes that Gibson does not seem fully alive on screen unless he is being tortured; he points to the movie *Payback* (1999), in which Gibson took control away from the director in order to make his character's torture even more grueling. In his films, Gibson is the hero, or individual leader who triumphs over those who are out to get him. In *Payback,* Gibson's character, Porter, enacts violence upon his enemies; however, the center of the film, according to Brown (2000: 124), is suffering. Brown notes that "among lesser pains, Porter is shot; has the bullets removed in a back room by a drunk; is run over by a car; gets beat up by thugs from the mob, by thugs from a Chinese gang, by thugs from the police; and even has his toes sledgehammered." Ansen (2004) describes the typical Gibson hero as one who is "pummeled and persecuted, driven to suicidal extremes."

In *Lethal Weapon*, Gibson's hands are tied over his head while he is tortured with electrical shocks. *Braveheart* (1995), in which Gibson plays Scottish patriot William Wallace, ends with Wallace, after having been captured by the English, being told to drop to his knees and declare his loyalty to the king in order to gain the king's mercy. Wallace is publicly tortured, first by being hanged but not killed and then dropped, after which he is told to kiss the royal cloaks, but refuses. He is then "racked" as his limbs are stretched. Finally, he is placed on a cross-like table and disemboweled. Throughout the evisceration scene, the viewer sees only Gibson's face, as he neither cries nor screams in pain but simply gasps for breath as the crowd cries out for his torturers to show him mercy. His last breath is spent triumphantly crying out "freedom" before he expires and his body is beheaded. Jessica Winter (2004) of *The Village Voice* comments that "*Braveheart's* ample impalings, throat-slicings, spearings, and hatchetings, not to mention its close acquaintance with arrows snagged in human flesh, may provide a warm-up for *The Passion*."

Gibson's obsession with violence was insightfully reflected in an episode of the Comedy Central series *South Park* entitled "The Passion of the Jew." After seeing *The Passion of the Christ*, two of the kids, Kenny and Stan, comment that "that movie sucked" and set off on a journey to find Mel Gibson to ask for their money back. When they find Gibson, he says that they'll have to torture and whip him. He then lies down on an S&M table, reminiscent of the final scene in *Braveheart*, awaiting his punishment. While Gibson awaits the agony of torture, the boys steal $18.00 from Gibson's wallet (to reimburse themselves the cost of the movie) and take the bus home to South Park. Gibson follows the boys back to their home, and finds that the Jews in town have asked to have the movie removed from the local theater. Interpreting this as an attack, and revealing Gibson's obsession with suffering, he asks if any of the townspeople want to torture him.

Like characters in earlier Gibson films, in *The Passion*, Jesus is unjustly tortured by those around him. Perhaps the most violent scene in the movie takes place when Jesus is shackled to a stump to hold him in place while he is beaten by Roman soldiers. The soldiers make animal-like noises with two soldiers bearing their teeth at each other like wild dogs. During this scene, which lasts for a little more than ten minutes, the audience is not given subtitled translations for what the Roman soldiers say to each other, further making them into barbaric animals. When the Roman soldiers are given the cue, they lash Jesus on the back with switches, each soldier taking a turn until Jesus has been beaten thirty-seven times during which we see welts and blood cover his back and the backs of his legs. At the end of the beating, Jesus is on his knees. Triumphantly, he stands back up and looks over at his mother, his breathing painfully heavy. The Roman soldiers continue to laugh as Jesus is beaten with a leather whip with hooks on the end that tear into his flesh. Each time that the whip is taken from his back, bloody gashes remain. The Roman soldiers who torture Jesus smile and laugh even as blood and flesh splatter their faces. Jesus is unable to stay on his knees. His hands shaking with pain, he slips to the floor as the whipping continues. During this beating episode, one hand is unshackled and Jesus lies on his back while being whipped on his stomach. The whippings stop when Abenader, the leader of the Roman soldiers, tells the other soldiers and overseer that their orders were to punish Jesus, not to "scourge him to death." The last shot that we have in this scene is a bloodied Jesus lying face up, pools of crimson and purple blood extending for feet around him. To remove Jesus from the scene, the soldiers do not pick him up, but rather drag him by his hands.

After Jesus is removed from the courtyard, the Roman soldiers place a crown of thorns on his head and smash it down with rods. Blood comes from Jesus' head as he writhes in pain but does not make a sound. The soldiers mock the fact that Jesus proclaims himself a deity by giving him a purple robe and a staff, after which they mockingly bow before him. Jesus is again brought before Pilate where Ciaphas, the high priest, declares that he be crucified.   The crowd concurs. After the crucifixion sentence is handed to Jesus and he is given his cross, the Roman soldiers lead the procession to the hill where the crucifixion will take place. On the way to the hill, while Jesus is carrying his whole cross (the other prisoners only have the horizontal cross beams), he is spat upon, slapped, and beaten by the still jocular soldiers. One of these blows causes Jesus to fall over. This fall is shot in slow motion. As he tries to get back up the soldiers flog him on his back and we see blood soak through his robes. The beatings are so brutal that the Roman soldiers are stopped multiple times by different authorities and even by Simon, the man in the crowd selected to help Jesus carry his cross.

What is interesting about Gibson's treatment of extreme violence in his previous films, as well as in *The Passion,* is that the violence that he and Jesus undergo is usually meaningful. In many of his films, Gibson undergoes protracted pain during the course of which, he subtly hints of discomfort and even occasionally cracks jokes. For the most part, however, he endures his punishment, foreshadowing the Jesus of *The Passion*. Where Jesus departs from the traditional Gibsonian hero is that, while he is the victim of violence for much of the film, from the beginning of the film, Jesus controls the amount of pain and suffering he will endure. We are given this signal at the beginning of the film when Jesus is in the garden with Satan. There, he uses his foot to destroy the snake that Satan has released, indicating that he will triumph over those out to undermine him. In fact, with Jesus in control of his circumstances, we should see him, less like the typical Gibson characters of film and more like the Gibson portrayed in South Park, as orchestrating these self-tortures, which serves as further illustration of a rightwing masculinity that would have men control women and the world. Recall Modleski's (1986: 769) generalization that a marker of contemporary horror texts is the fact that they are open-ended, do not provide audiences with closure, and, because of their lack of character development, show very little differences between good and evil characters. *The Passion* departs from this model in that it presents a clear demarcation between good and evil that manifests itself in the gendered dichotomy of an evil, sneaky, independent female and a good, strong, independent male. Further, there is resolution in this narrative at the end of the film, when Jesus has his revenge over those who have victimized him throughout the course of the film.

While the closed narrative and dichotomy between good and evil mark areas of departure between *The Passion* and other contemporary horror films, there are some important convergences with the genre. First, we as audience members are asked to identify with Jesus' passive victimization (at least throughout the narrative middle of the movie), which, according to Kaja Silverman (1988), is typically the case in horror films. In fact, as the Passion narrative unfolds on the screen, we are masochistically engaged with the story primarily because we identify with the representative of "good" on the screen, who also happens to be a likable protagonist. We are further asked to participate in the masochism of single-victim horror as we are bound to the suspense and tension that exists because of the protagonist's desire to escape and the knowledge that his dreadful demise is inevitable (Clover 1992: 219). However, this inevitability did not deter audience members from seeing Jesus' story as their own story. Clover (1992) argues that masochism typically makes up the narrative middle of most horror films. This is especially the case with a particular subgenre of horror, the rape-revenge films, where audiences watch protagonists passively victimized during the first phase of the film and exacting revenge on their torturers during the second phase of the film.

Because the Jesus of *The Passion* is shown as both the victim and victimizer, *The Passion of the Christ* can be considered a type of rape-revenge film with a final triumphant male, rather than triumphant female, which is typically the case in the genre. Clover (1992: 17) observes that modern horror has given a new gender structure to its audiences: the woman who is both a suffering victim and avenging hero. This archetypical protagonist has long been associated with the male action-adventure hero, but in the rape-revenge film, socially constructed notions of gender supersede biological sex. As Clover (1992: 158) explains, the femaleness of the victim “proceeds from the quintessential femininity that comes from being raped.” Ryan and Kellner (1988: 215) argue that for men, loss in war draws out shame and vulnerability, the result of which is a feminizing effect on men. To illustrate, Ryan and Kellner (1988) consider the action-adventure movie *Rambo* (1982). Briefly, after returning to the United States from Vietnam, John Rambo, the lone survivor in his unit, goes looking for friends from the war. During his travels, he is arrested by a local sheriff in Oregon; after enduring torture and harassment from local authorities, he retreats to the woods where he applies his Vietnam-era survival skills. His side defeated in the war, and his presence unwelcome in the United States, Rambo has failed in his mission and lost his source of self-worth. Within the *Rambo* narrative, the hero – and, by extension, the United States – eventually defeats the local authorities and thus gains the victory that the country could not achieve in the Vietnam war. As a result, he is re-masculinized. What is more, Ryan and Kellner (1988) observe, films such as *Rambo* espouse a conservative message where social relationships are based on hierarchy, patriarchy, and individualism; similar themes are found in Gibson’s *Passion*.

Since generic elements of *The Passion of the Christ* as well as the long torturous narrative middle align the film with the horror genre, Jesus should more accurately be viewed as the protagonist of a rape-revenge fantasy rather than as the hero of an action-adventure narrative. Like John Rambo and many of the protagonists in Mel Gibson’s action-adventure films, Jesus is able to overcome his attackers. However, unlike the action-adventure/rape-revenge protagonist, Jesus does not enact his revenge for personal reasons. He is out to avenge the world for humankind by creating a new *status quo* where good triumphs over evil and Christianity triumphs over the Roman state and the Jewish tradition.

As mentioned in chapter two, the masculine Jesus of *The Passion* is a departure from the traditionally accessible and loving Jesus evident in the history of American Protestantism. Recall that, historically, American Protestantism has been a religion based upon Jesus-loving rather than God-fearing (Prothero 2004: 26). Krondorfer (2004: 17) argues that Gibson's film must be read as part of a movement begun in the mid-nineteenth century that has attempted to re-masculinize Christianity by replacing the sentimental and emotional aspects of Christianity with masculine and muscular values. Krondorfer points to Gibson's selection of a well-built male body to play Jesus as supporting a muscular Christianity. Moreover, Gibson's masculine Jesus stands in marked contrast to the Jesus portrayed in such earlier films as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964) and George Steven's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), which attempt to give a biographical account of the life of Jesus and focus more on his earlier life and ministry. Other films, such as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ: Superstar* (1973), based on Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical of the same name, concentrate on the ministry of Jesus and emphasize his humanity rather than his divinity. The Jesus of *The Passion* reflects less the peace-loving Jesus of the New Testament and more the justice-obsessed God of the Old Testament. By transforming Jesus into the direct descendent of the vengeful and jealous God of Abraham and Moses, Gibson and, by extension, the right have essentially mobilized and militarized their savior into someone who will not just empathize with their victimization, but actively and violently intervene to make the world a just place.

Like rape victims, the Jesus of *The Passion* withstands incredible torture and pain. From the moment that a dozen guards come to arrest Jesus to take him before the high priests at the temple, we see Peter and John, Jesus' disciples, engaging the guards in heated hand-to-hand combat. Peter, in his effort to defend Jesus, even draws a sword and cuts off the ear of one temple guard. However, rather than engage in combat, Jesus thoughtfully and pensively watches as the scene unfolds, even reaching out to heal the ear of the maimed guard. He tells Peter to lay his sword down, adding, "Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword." Looking at Gibson's body of work, Brown (2002: 133) argues that when Gibson is tortured in his films, he is not placed in the typically feminine position of victim; rather, he confirms his incontestable masculinity by showing his ability to withstand pain and to triumph over his torturers.

In the rape-revenge films of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the world was portrayed as a "rape culture" in which most men are complicit in perpetrating violence against women. Similarly, rape becomes a problem that women are expected to solve themselves by seeking revenge on their own behalf. The Satan-dominated world of *The Passion of the Christ* can be seen as a parallel to the violent society found in the rape-revenge film. Like the women in the rape-revenge scenario who stake their claim to independence in a male-dominated world, the Jesus of *The Passion* asserts his right to dominate a Satan (read: female)-controlled world. Recall from chapter three that one of the right's responses to problematic feminism was a resurgence of a masculinity that had manifested itself culturally in organizations like the Promise Keepers, which encourage men to be the primary providers for their families and are guided by a literalist reading of the Bible. Furthermore, while the victims in rape-revenge films endure acts of intense sexual violence, the rape-revenge scenario provides these women with agency and a utopian storyline, where women are able to take justice into their own hands to right the wrongs that have been done to them. For most of the film, Jesus seems not to want to harm those who commit violence against him. In fact, for most of the film we see Jesus taking the punishment administered by the Jewish and Roman soldiers. However, during the scene when Jesus is hanging on his cross, we begin to see Jesus assaulting others. In this scene, one of the criminal who flanks Jesus taunts him saying, "If you are the son of God, why don't you save yourself? Prove to us you are the one you say you are." Ciaphas similarly taunts, "You say that you will destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days and yet you cannot come down from that cross. If he is the Messiah, I say let him come down from the cross so that we may see and believe." Jesus answers him saying, "Forgive them Father, they know not what they do." After this proclamation and a conversation with the other criminal who has been sentenced to die, Jesus is laughed at and mocked by the first criminal. Rather than say anything in response, a crow lands atop this criminal's cross and pecks at his eye three times before shaking the man's blood from its feathers and being shoved away by one of the Roman soldiers. Whether Jesus wills the bird into action is unclear; regardless, it is clear that forces enacting Jesus' revenge are at work. Significantly, after this episode, no other soldier, criminal, observer, or official mocks Jesus. In fact, this episode with the bird ushers in the revenge sequence complete with the threat of storms, soldiers appearing to be routed in battle, and an earthquake that destroys the temple. By making Jesus the main character in a type of rape-revenge film, Gibson has effectively commandeered the rape-revenge narrative, undermining the powerful women protagonists in this horror subgenre.

Recall, Telford's (125) argument that one of the greatest challenges for filmmakers who choose the life of Jesus as their subject is that they must make a film that is both historical and contemporary – to present a subject that bridges the gap between the first-century world and our own. Kirkpatrick (2004: 4.1) links the masculinizing trajectory that Jesus has undergone, with the rise in popularity of evangelical Christianity and its increasing clout. He writes that "the image of a fearsome Jesus who will turn the tables on the unbelieving earthly authorities corresponds to a widespread sense among many conservative Christians that their values are under assault in a culture war with a secular society around them." This shift has occurred with surging interests in biblical prophecy of the Apocalypse, the terrorists' attacks of September 11, and the two wars with Iraq. The Jesus of *The Passion of the Christ* is a masculine hero, an answer to victimization who suffers and triumphs alone.

The Neoliberal Individual and the Meaning of Suffering

Just as the women in rape-revenge films must work alone to avenge the violence visited upon them, the Jesus of *The Passion* suffers alone and alone avenges the violence visited upon his body. The political rationality individualism is present in many modern horror films including those mentioned by Crane (1994: 12), who looks at films such as *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). In all three movies, groups of people use collection action to try and stop a variety of monsters, but their efforts amount to nothing. Crane (1994: 145) observes that, early in *Friday the 13th*, the group of counselors work together to ready the camp for the children who are to attend. However, when they are threatened with death, they are not allowed to work together and split into "a bunch of helpless and weak individuals who have no hope of survival." The modern horror film, Crane (1994: 4) contends, promotes the following idea: "All collective action will fail; knowledge and experience have no value when one is engaged with the horrible; and the destruction of the menace (should it occur) carries no guarantee that the future will be safe." In other words, there is no chance for safety, and suffering is essentially meaningless. While the Jesus of *The Passion* is like the victims of *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *Night of the Living Dead*, in that he suffers alone, unlike these characters, Jesus' suffering has meaning. Witherington (2004: 89, 91) argues that Gibson's Jesus is a model of "suffering love," where enduring extended pain is seen as a "means of sanctification and purification." In fact, Witherington (2004: 91) argues that within evangelical Christianity, a belief exists that one can become a better person through suffering if "(s/he) will submit the suffering into God's hands" (Witherington 2004: 92).

Witherington points out that in the Gospels, Jesus' followers are warned that they, like Jesus, will be called to take up their crosses and may too be called to experience suffering love. Therefore, Jesus' suffering creates a plausibility structure for human suffering (Berger 1967: 76). Berger sites Camus' evaluation of Christ's death as a narrative that makes suffering bearable for humanity. Camus (in Berger 1967: 76-77) writes: "In that Christ suffered, and had suffered voluntarily, suffering was no longer unjust and all pain was necessary. . .only the sacrifice of an innocent god could justify the endless and universal torture of innocence. Only the most abject suffering by God could assuage man's agony. If everything, without exception, in heaven and earth is doomed to pain and suffering, then a strange happiness is possible." Indeed, it is though suffering that humanity finds its redemption and we are made into better people.

In putting the violence of Jesus' death into a historical and theological perspective, theologian Phillip Cunningham (2004: 56) argues that it is important to remember that, historically, "Jesus was only one of thousands of Jews whom the Romans crucified." However, *The Passion of the Christ*, ahistorically, makes Jesus unique in his suffering. Cunningham notes that in the film, Jesus is the only prisoner who is scourged before being crucified, even though this practice would have been common for all those facing this method of execution. Also, Jesus is the only one made to carry an enormously heavy complete cross, as opposed to carrying the more historically accurate cross-bars that the other criminals bear. In *The Passion*, Jesus is not one of many but rather a singularly unique individual persecuted for his righteousness and, by extension, religious beliefs. By enduring an inhuman amount of suffering, Jesus is at the same time a redemptive, highly masculinized, and reactionary presence in the world.

Wood (1986:189-192) observes that two strains in horror emerged in the 1980s: apocalypse and conservatism. Apocalyptic[5] films showed the world at its end, while conservative, or reactionary, films provided a return to the *status quo* in reaction to the progressive ideologies (i.e. equal rights) that emerged from the 1970s. As noted in chapter two, the time that the George W. Bush administration was in power has parallels to the 1980s. While the Passion narrative is an old story, Gibson's film gave new life to the narrative during a critical era in American conservatism. In examining the reactionary horror films of the 1970s and early 1980s, Wood (1986: 192) observes several generic trends that we see in Gibson's *Passion*: the monster in the film is unmistakably evil and inhuman, and is often associated with the devil incarnate; and there is a strong presence of Christianity. While Wood observes these trends in films like *The Omen* (1976) and *The Exorcist* (1973), by retelling a Christian tale, Gibson expresses more reactionary anxiety than the horror filmmakers of the previous reactionary period.

Kirkpatrick (2004: 4.1) argues that a warlike Jesus fit with President George W. Bush's religious discussions of having a godly purpose for military action in Iraq and Afghanistan. Jesus validates the necessity of strong masculine heroes who can purge the nation of its strong feminine presence and, as a result, protect and strengthen the nation. Goldstein (2004) argues that *The Passion* offers a vision of Jesus who is striding forth to the beating of drums – a vision that was met by Gibson's audience at an inflamed and paranoid time. Weiseltier (2004: 21) validates this vision by writing that, for those on the right, Gibson's use of violence is justified, because "this is God's violence…this violence is good for America."

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[5] It is worth noting that following the release of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, Gibson released the film *Apocalypto*, about the fall of the Mayan civilization, in 2006.

Indeed, the final scenes of *The Passion* give us a Jesus who functions as a utopian problem-solver, a masculine savior who has his revenge against those who have harmed him. After Jesus dies on the cross, we see a drop of water fall from heaven and those attending the crucifixion are shaken by an earthquake. We are shown the stone steps of the temple breaking in two as flames fall from the torches on the walls and Caiaphas tearfully surveys the damage. Satan, the figure responsible for Jesus' torture and crucifixion, is shown thrashing about, bald and writhing, on dry, cracked ground, surrounded by dried skeletal remains, perhaps meant to symbolize Satan's descent into hell.

The final scene of *The Passion* shows Jesus not just triumphing over his enemies but over death, as well. When the stone outside of the tomb where Jesus is buried rolls away, the shroud that covered him is clean and empty, with Jesus fully-restored to what is presumably his pre-Passion self. Jesus closes his eyes pensively before arising to the beat of unmistakably martial drums. The last shot before he leaves the tomb is of Jesus' right hand with the nail hole in it, perhaps indicating that he is setting out to exact revenge on his persecutors and doubters. David Edelstein writes that, in this final scene, Jesus reminds him of Arnold Schwarzenegger's character the Terminator, or the "Christianator – heading out into the world to spread the bloody news."

The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon left many in the United States feeling vulnerable and, in a sense, emasculated. By taking revenge first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, the George W. Bush administration sought, in part, to reassert its role as protector of the globe, the unmistakable leader in a global holy war. In using the horror genre, Gibson emphasizes the vulnerability of attack by one's enemies, even when these events may be pre-ordained, as often is theologically interpreted in the case of Jesus. Gibson once commented that, with *The Passion*, he was not interested in making a religious movie – he was making a war movie (Boyer 2004: 59). The President of the United States, George W. Bush, couched his descriptions of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in religious terms. Bush called the terrorist hijackers of 9/11 "evil doers" and frequently applied this label to the insurgents who fought against the United States in Iraq. Such descriptions have the effect of making war seem not just physical or ideological in nature but also religious. Not surprisingly, in *The Passion of the Christ*, war was framed within a moral, not a social, context.

Klawans (2004a) finds it problematic that Gibson alleged to employ literalism to a text that he sees as inerrant – a move that raised the stakes for his project and foreclosed any possibility of critical interpretation. For Klawans (2004a), Gibson's actions reflected the beliefs of people who at the time held political power and, like Gibson, did not "consider their convictions to be open to discussion." *The Passion of the Christ* was released at a time when governmental policy in the United States did not seem to be open for discussion. With the mass media seemingly supportive of the war that took place in Afghanistan. The U.S. Military, who were proactive in garnering support for the war effort, embedding reporters with American troops. This strategy, generated sympathy for the military's effort and worked to strengthen nationalism. In fact, during this time period, the national political environment was not ripe for discussion or debate on issues of war, which only reinforced the absolutism evident in Gibson's *Passion*. In 2009, the right does not seem to have the same power that it did in 2004 and the climate of absolutism may be coming to a close, at least for the time being. However, with a global economic recession (caused in large part by faulty U.S. government policies), the suffering love that Jesus experiences in *The Passion* may bring new meaning to those who are also experiencing suffering that seems beyond their control. The conclusion of this work explores the legacy of *The Passion* as well as further directions for research regarding social horror, Christian cinema, and social crises.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF FUSIONISM AND CHRISTIAN MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

The year that *The Passion of the Christ* was released, 2004, was pivotal for several reasons. Most obviously, it represented the most recent success of right-wing fusionism where a coalition of neoliberals, neoconservatives, and religious conservatives came together to elect George W. Bush to his second term as president of the United States. These seemingly disparate and at times contradictory groups were brought together by strategic planners on the right; these planners reinforced their message by deploying political rationalities that resonated with members of each group. Primary among these rationalities was fierce individualism, which dictates that a person of upstanding moral character not be dependent on others, especially the state, for economic assistance. By not being a financial burden on the state, the moral individual strengthens the United Sates so that the country can use its resources to promote democracy in other nations and regions around the world, the heart of the neoconservative agenda. In this combination of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, nationalism takes on a decidedly individualistic, moral, and masculine tone. When these two ideological fields became fused with the Religious Right, liberal cultural policies, including a strong women's rights agenda, access to abortion, and the legalization of same-sex marriage, were seen as weakening the United States and its mission in the world. Thus, in 2004, conservatives essentially embraced and reinforced individualism, nationalism, and masculinity as solutions for the social problems that they identified.

Prior to the 2004 election, those on the right were able to articulate a coherent policy that connected the aforementioned rationalities to one another. While contradictions exist between certain beliefs of these groups (for example, while neoliberalism asks for little to no state intervention in the market, the Religious Right requires the government to pass laws to govern the behaviors of individuals), the groups were masterfully brought together whenever conservatives viewed themselves as persecuted, or victimized, by the Left. A strong argument can be made that *The Passion* is the quintessential film of the right during this time period. Gibson was able to skillfully tap into these rationalities when making and marketing this film, first, by capitalizing on the neoliberal economic policies that allowed him to make his film at a lower cost in Italy, and, second, by painting himself as the victim of a nefarious left-wing media conspiracy. Like Gibson himself, the Jesus that Gibson created for *The Passion* was a victim – of Satan, the strong female presence on the screen, who was out to thwart his God-given mission. In Jesus, Gibson created a hero who appealed to the very same political rationalities that the right used to engineer its success. By enduring violence at the hands of a monstrous feminine character, and later violently seeking revenge on Satan and on those she controlled, Jesus asserts a militaristic agenda intertwined with masculinity and individualism.

In this conclusion, I will explore the reasons why 2004 may have marked a peak for the right's fusion of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and beliefs held by the Religious Right. Based upon an analysis of the political rationalities initially outlined in chapter two and used to guide the discussions of chapters three and four, I argue that if *The Passion* was released in 2009, it would not likely garner the same box office success that it did in 2004. This is due in large part to the decreasing popularity of the political rationalities that drove the positive reception of *The Passion* in 2004. While there would likely be an audience for *The Passion* today, the story would likely speak to viewers in a different way than it did during the year it was released.

Cracks in the Foundation: The Failure of Fusionism

As explored in chapter two, neoliberal economic policy ushered in a golden age of capitalistic policy in the United States and, through international loan and aid programs that emphasized neoliberal economic free market policies, around the world. Political rationalities developed as an extension of these policies, including a strong emphasis on individualism and self-care as opposed to the government taking responsibility for its citizens via a strong social safety net. With the United States' comparatively higher standard of living and reinforcement from the embedded political rationalism of individualism, capitalistic and free market polices had more success in the United States than in other areas of the globe. Saad-Filho (2005: 227) points to new social movements that have emerged in many Latin American countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela that have protested the neoliberal agenda and insisted on democratic alternatives. Indeed, one need only look to the international popularity of the World Social Forum which has served as a counter to the neoliberal economic driver, the World Economic Forum.

The spring 2008 announcement that the large investment bank Bear-Stearns was insolvent marked the beginning of the newest phase of capitalism, one where faith in the economic system, and by extension the political rationality of individualism, may be diminishing in importance. The United States Treasury Department and Federal Reserve Bank’s granting insurance giant AIG a $180 billion assistance package and General Motors Corporation $27 billion as of April 2009 to keep the companies afloat may be an indicator that fundamental free-marketism may be losing ground (“American International Group” 2009; Vlasic and Bunkley 2009). While there certainly has been some backlash against these actions with calls by citizens to bail out “main street” instead of Wall Street, with these events we are seeing implicit approval for a return to Keynesian interventionism and suspicion of free and unregulated markets. As neoliberals were able to advance their agendas by forming close ties with business schools and governments, those who advocate for regulation and market reforms are now doing the same. With unemployment at 8.6 % as of April 2009, many citizens have stopped seeing the current financial crisis as a problem of their own making, but rather one caused by circumstances beyond their own control. It is possible that we could see a reversal with regard to the political rationality of individualism, and also witness the emergence of a new political rationality that emphasizes the need for help from others, including the state. As mentioned in chapter two, victimization has accompanied and fueled the political rationality of individualism. While it is possible that there will be changes in the way Americans view individualism, it is unlikely that victimization will disappear anytime soon. However, the victimizer may not be the same. For those on the far right, the moral state of the nation may still be seen as driving the economic strength of the country. Therefore, for this group, if the country has suffered an economic collapse, it is the result of individuals who are dependent on the state or of unions who have taken advantage of generous state laws and who are responsible for weakening strong companies, e.g., the domestic automobile industry. Those who are more moderate may view themselves as the victims of irresponsible governance, i.e., those who should have been more closely regulating the businesses who are the genesis of the recession. Moreover, having lost faith in the market, some may come to see themselves as the victims of businesses who, unregulated, were out to defraud American citizens.

The second crack in the foundation of the right comes from the failure of neoconservative foreign policy to return the U.S. to its place of successful global leader. The economic crisis, while now global, is viewed at home and abroad as starting in the United States. With its lack of financial regulation, the U.S. government is viewed by many as irresponsible for allowing banks to offer and consumers to purchase NINA, or “no income, no asset” home loans. In addition, it was the purchase of toxic mortgage-backed securities by major banks in the United States and Europe that caused the dominos of the global economy to start to fall. These irresponsible economic policies have shown a fundamental weakness in the “free market” economic policies, having caused economic insecurity on a mass scale and signaling more than ever before that the United States is losing its place as a global superpower.

In addition to the weakening of its major financial institutions, the United States has been bogged down in two unpopular and expensive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the economic situation continues to deteriorate at home, with unemployment rates on the rise, many citizens see this money as better spent elsewhere and the support for militarism has begun to wane. Rather than acting as the “the world’s democracy”, many Americans argue, the United States may be leading the world into a global economic and political quagmire. Indeed, the economic and military situations have become so negative that citizens have begun to focus on them rather than the cultural issues that were so popular during the 2004 election. The best evidence of the tenuous coalition upon which the Republican party is formed was the election of a Democratic majority to the U. S. House and Senate in November 2006 and of Barak Obama to the White House in November 2008. While there is little evidence that American troops will leave either military theater anytime soon, Obama’s foreign policy initiatives, which stress diplomacy, indicate a decisive shift away from Bush-era militaristic tactics. In addressing the challenge of Islam (and, by extension, fundamentalism) to the West, Obama has departed from the neoconservative playbook and delivered a major address in Cairo in which he called for increased cooperation between the nations of the West and the Middle East. This strategy shift may be evidence that a different brand of nationalism, one based on negotiation and subtlety, may be replacing the masculine and militaristic nationalism popular when *The Passion* was released.

In addition to neoliberal and neoconservative policies losing supporters, the Republican Party may also be hemorrhaging members from the Religious Right, a relationship that has been in place since the early 1970s (Miller 2006: 32). This is not only because the right has not been successful in implementing conservative moral legislation, but because the message of the right no longer seems to speak to the variety of religious beliefs among conservatives. Consider Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, who delivered the invocation at Barak Obama's inauguration. Warren, a self-identified evangelical, has supported causes traditionally championed by the right such as ending abortion and embryonic stem-cell research. While these issues remain important to Warren and other evangelicals, they are no longer the primary issues with which this group is concerned. Warren has denounced torture, demanded an end to the atrocities in Darfur, and promotes an end to poverty (Miller 2006: 32). Warren is not alone. Michael Gerson (2006), former speechwriter and policy advisor for George W. Bush, speaks of a "new evangelicalism" that calls for broad social engagement by evangelicals, including an end to poverty and a mitigation of the effects of social inequality in the United States. A call to action asking global governments and aid organizations to end global poverty is antithetical to policies that demand free trade or those that promote war. If the evangelical movement continues to evolve, it may be more difficult for the fusionist strategy to succeed again for the Republican Party. While evangelicals may seem to be leaning more toward the left on some social issues, this is not the case for all issues. For example, the world of evangelicalism continues to be one dominated by masculinity and hetero-normativity. While it is likely that evangelicals may adopt a progressive environmental agenda, with their continuing strong support for the traditional family unit, it is unlikely that they will strongly embrace feminism or throw their support behind same-sex marriage initiatives.

Since the socio-economic political world is the same as the cultural world, it is not a surprise that as social or economic policy changes, culture evolves as well, as was seen above in the discussion of the changes in evangelical Christianity. Changes can be seen in the general population, as well. Meacham (2009: 36) reports the results of a *Newsweek* poll in which a declining number of people (62% today, compared to 69% in 2008) think of the United States as a Christian nation. What is more, two-thirds of the public contend that religion is losing influence in America (Meacham 2009: 36). The Republican Party has seemingly admitted that it needs to regroup and find a new strategy if it is to be successful in the future. In early May 2009, a prominent group of Republican leaders, including unsuccessful 2008 presidential candidate John McCain, Louisiana Governor, Bobby Jindal, and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, began a "listening tour" to boost the party's image and strategize for future elections ("GOP Launches Makeover"). As voters have changed, Republicans are finding that they too must change. For example, a Quinnipac University poll released the last week of April 2009 found that while 55% of Americans oppose same sex marriage, 57% support civil unions that would provide marriage-like rights for same sex couples (Sodoti 2009: 6A). While hetero-normative masculinity still reigns supreme in evangelical circles, the above statistics show that issues concerning sexuality may need to be deemphasized if Republicans want to ensure political success in the future. Republicans will strongly need to consider appealing to voters across the political spectrum rather than continuing to court their ultra-conservative political base.

The Passion *Today*

If released today, it is unlikely that *The Passion* would have the same record-setting success that it did in 2004. As discussed above, the cohesion that the coalition of neoliberals, neoconservatives, and the Religious Right that elected George W. Bush the same year that *The Passion* was released has begun to wane. While Gibson might still be able to appeal to religious conservatives, the promotional tactics that he used would likely not garner the same successful response that they obtained in 2004. This is due in part to the fact that the individualism highlighted in the “go-it-alone” attitude of the Bush administration during the Iraq war and the victimization rhetoric made popular during the culture war of 2004 resonate less with the public to which Gibson appealed. While citizens may feel like they are individual victims of hard economic times, because of the recession, they may be less likely to blame themselves for their unemployment or the loss of their homes. Rather, because the recession is seen more as a social problem than a personal one, citizens may be more likely to seek out help from one another as well as from the government.

As the reasoning behind the political rationalities wanes in influence, so does their ability to “stick together.” In other words, in 2004, when *The Passion of the Christ* was released, individualism, masculinity, victimization, militarism, and nationalism worked to reinforce each other. As neoliberal economic policies weaken, so does individualism and, by extension, the tough-guy masculine, unilateral U.S. military policy. While the political rationalities certainly have not disappeared from American society, they have come to mean something different and are less cohesive in their new socio-political economic and cultural context.

In addition to the fact that the five major political rationalities that were popular in 2004 have lost much of their resonance with the public and no longer reinforce one another, Gibson himself is not the marketable presence he once was. Gibson has tarnished his image with the public through a widely reported series of personal failings, including public outbursts of anti-Semitism, alcoholism, drunk driving, and adultery. With these negative issues plaguing him, it is less likely that Gibson would be able to convincingly use the same victimization rhetoric that he used in 2004 to help him promote the film, as he is unlikely to be viewed as an innocent victim.

While *The Passion* may not have had the same box office success that it did in 2004, were it released in 2009, this does not mean that it would not still speak to viewers. In fact, with the current crisis distressing the global economy, the image of Jesus of *The Passion* might speak to some viewers as much or even more than it did in 2004. In the April 30, 2009, edition of his blog, *The Daily Dish*, political writer Andrew Sullivan posted a video clip of the trailer for *The Passion of the Christ* in juxtaposition with survey findings from an April 2009 poll from the Pew Center on Religion and Public Life that asked respondents from different religious backgrounds whether torture of suspected terrorists can be justified. Forty-nine percent of respondents said that torture can either sometimes or often be justified. Of the white, evangelical Protestants polled, seventy-two percent agreed that torture can sometimes or often be justified, making them the most pro-torture group of any group polled. By juxtaposing *The Passion* with the survey results mentioned above, Sullivan implicitly notes that the same Christians who were outraged at the fact that Jesus was abused and tortured by religious and state authorities are accepting of the abuse and torture carried out against suspected Islamic terrorists by the United States government under the Bush administration.

While Sullivan may intend to deem this apparent discrepancy as evidence of hypocrisy, the pro-torture evangelical Protestants likely see no contradictions in their beliefs. Like in 2004, they would still view Jesus as a masculine superhero-type who can take any torture given to him, emerge triumphant, and utilize his suffering for a purpose greater than himself. The torture of Islamic fundamentalists, in the eyes of many white evangelical Protestants, likewise serves a greater purpose, that of keeping the United States safe from future terrorist attacks. Further, those who have suffered job loss or downward economic mobility during the recent recession might view the Jesus of *The Passion* as responding to his misfortune with aggressive and triumphant masculinity.

Unfortunately, this masculinity could continue to look very much like Jesus' response to Satan in *The Passion* and could translate into further marginalization of or even violence toward women. While it is too early for any large studies to have been conducted on this topic, news reports from professionals and those working at women's shelters indicate an increase in domestic abuse ("Recent Rise Seen in Domestic Violence"). During economic downturns, there are more cases of domestic violence, etc. as men try to find alternative ways to construct their masculinity when they are unable to do so economically. In his book *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic,* James

Gilligan (1997: 237-239) identifies relative poverty as cultivating shame in men who are not able to provide for themselves or their families. Like the rape victim or action-adventure hero of film who has suffered at the hands of others, for many men, violence is the means of overcoming shame and reasserting a sense of masculinity and dominance in a world that gives its victims very little economic power.

The Future of Christian Cinema

By serving as a cinematic rallying point for those on the right, *The Passion of the Christ* brought new audiences to the movies. Miller et al. (2005: 262) contend that market failure is not the exception in Hollywood; it is fundamental to the way the business of American and by extension global cinema operates. In response to this, filmmakers take every possible step and provision to ensure the success of their films. In hopes of capitalizing on the huge number of believers who came out to support *The Passion*, many filmmakers and production companies have launched more recent efforts to appeal to believers but none have been able to replicate the success of Gibson's efforts.

The most successful post-*Passion* films to appeal to Christian audiences were the first two installments in the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* released in December 2005 and *Prince Caspian* released in 2008. These two films, distributed by Walt Disney and Walden Media, grossed a little more than $291,000,000 and $141,000,000 respectively (Internet Movie Data Base 2009c; Internet Movie Data Base 2009d). While the Narnia franchise may have appealed to some of the same viewers who supported *The Passion,* they may also have been successful because they were not marketed as "Christian" films but rather as family-friendly fare and were distributed by two companies known for their PG and G-rated films, such as *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004) and *Because of Winn Dixie* (2005). While *The Passion of the Christ* may have appealed to audiences because it was an overtly “Christian” film, Walden Media’s releases may have appealed to audiences because they are not overtly Christian.

Other films that have tried to capitalize on the success of *The Passion* have not had the same success of the Narnia films. For example, *One Night with the King*, based on the story of Esther, was released in October 2006 by New Line Cinema and shown in only 400 fewer theaters than *The Passion* (3,083 vs. 3,408) (Internet Movie Data Base 2009b; Internet Movie Data Base 2004a). This film, marketed as a Christian film and to Christian audiences, grossed only $37,629,831 – over $300,000,000 less than *The Passion*. Fox Studios, the studio that initially refused to distribute *The Passion* but later distributed the film on DVD, launched its own foray into Christian cinema when it established its Fox Faith division in October 2006. However, the studio may have missed its chance for success when it passed on distributing *The Passion*. The division’s first wide-screen release, *Love’s Abiding Joy*, was shown in theaters for three weeks in October 2006 and, while made at a cost of $3,000,000, grossed only a disappointing $252,000 (Internet Movie Data Base a). This division has had modest success, but has yet to find a film nearly as profitable as *The Passion*.

Recall Altman’s (1999) assertion that the most useful considerations of genre are those that view genres as developing from dynamic processes. At first blush, it may have seemed a like a good idea for Christian filmmakers, who wanted to experience financial success, to market their films as part of the “Christian” genre in an effort to replicate the success of *The Passion*. However, *The Passion* was more than a Christian film; rather, it was the centerpiece of a political movement that placed Christians and, by extension, those in the United States in an adversarial position vis-à-vis the dominant culture. More than just a “Christian film,” Gibson worked to ensure the success of *The Passion* by exploiting overt religious campaign-style marketing tactics.

Since the victimization stance no longer seems to resonate with the general public, for a “Christian” film to garner box office success, it must do more than market itself to the faithful. Rather, those marketing Christian films need to change to reflect the current socio-political/economic/cultural climate. As shown above in the discussion of Fox Faith’s lack of success, to simply be a “Christian film” is not enough to lure audiences to the theater. Since evangelical Christianity, the sect that has the most developed material culture and the most engagement with dominant culture, is changing, the “Christian” genre needs to evolve, too. The Walden Media group has had the most box office success because it has been able to move beyond Gibson’s marketing model by adopting a more nuanced social relationship that reflects the positive engagement evangelical Christianity currently has with dominant American political/economic culture. The old 2004 “Gibsonian” model for Christian film is one that appealed to overt religiosity, is fueled by the hostility of war, exploits the victim stance, and offers reactionary solutions to social problems. The “Walden” model, on the other hand, is one in which covert spirituality is showcased in films. Like the evangelical Christianity of today, this model presents a departure from *The Passion* with its engagement with rather than antagonism towards the dominant culture.

If another "Christian" film emerges as a box office success in the future, it, like *The Passion*, will likely reflect the political rationalities, or cultural ideologies, of its time and, by definition, the collective hopes and anxieties of its day. With the shifts that are taking place in evangelical Christianity, it is unlikely that the new political rationalities will be the same as those found in *The Passion.* By merging the tools of sociology, specifically political economic theory and analysis, with the tools of film studies, particularly an understanding of intertextuality and an appreciation for genre theory and generic conventions, future scholars can better see film as a means of mediating the changes that have taken place in the political and economic sphere and, by extension, the cultural realm as well.

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