This time, the guards reach for the flagellum, a wooden handle dangling strips of leather: attached to it are blades, razor sharp blades. They show it to Jesus, taunting him, before they begin. And then, with a wave of the overseer’s hand, the torture starts all over again. The guard reaches back, flagellum in hand, and swings; the blades rip across Jesus’ side, and blood sprays from five gashes. The count has begun. “Two!” He gasps, his breath taken away by the horrific pain. “Seven!” He cannot stand anymore, but they do not stop. His skin is torn to ribbons, but still they do not stop. “Ten!” The blades stay lodged in his side this time, and as the guard pulls away, flesh and blood fly from his body. They laugh. The count continues. “Sixteen!” There’s hardly any skin left on his back. “Twenty-Two!” More. “Twenty-Seven!” More. “Thirty Five!” Finally, the overseer stops them. Jesus lies on the ground, his body torn apart, but at last there is this moment of respite. A guard comes over and undoes one shackle but leaves the other locked; he flips Christ over. The next strike slashes his stomach, and blood sprays over the guards. The count begins anew.

It is this terrible violence that preoccupies much of Harvey Blume’s essay “Hammer,” in which he discusses the similarity between Mark Burnett’s reality television programming and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*; he believes each to have an “aesthetic or narrative fundamentalism” (109). Blume writes that, for all their differences of subject matter, the two men compose their stories in a similar fashion. Commenting on the “fundamentalism” that runs through both media, Blume writes: “Burnett and Gibson aim to cut through complications . . . to give the sensation of raw truth . . . and they place enormous emphasis on the power of ordeal to seal their pact with reality” (109). Both employ a fundamentalist story-telling style wherein depicting visceral reality is of paramount importance. They seek to portray “raw truth” and “reality,” and do so through “the power of ordeal.” Ordeals,
depictions of horrible experiences meant to convince viewers of the image’s truth, are the main device both men employ to show the brutal “reality” of their characters (109, 110).

Blume, though, takes issue with this supposed “reality.” While Gibson conceives his film as if it were history played out upon the screen, Blume accuses Gibson of being disingenuous about his source material, Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich’s *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Sister Emmerich, an 18th century German nun, describes her visions of the Passion in the first person, as if she were truly there. It is this sentiment that Gibson is attracted to: a personal attendance to Christ’s Passion. It seems that Gibson achieves his goal, at least in the view of Pope John Paul II whose supposed review of the film was “it is as it was” (109). Yet Blume objects, offering the controversy around Sister Emmerich as proof that Gibson has a flawed sense of canonical “reality”: “Doubts and complexities may gather around Sister Emmerich’s tales, but Gibson will not so much as acknowledge them” (110). Taking for the moment a religious perspective and assuming a Biblical interpretation to be “real,” Blume still finds that the use of this non-canonical text in a film that supposedly depicts reality dupes the audience. He also finds reality television guilty of the same tricks, seeing it as a doubtful depiction of reality taken from a source of shaky integrity, a manufactured scenario in which producers push their contestants toward outrageous behavior. Ultimately, he connects the two through their tones, suggesting that the programs “share one thing, at least, with *The Passion of the Christ*—its pessimism” (110). Blume believes Gibson’s film highlights the depravity and sinfulness of man in order to invoke guilt, while reality television merely garners laughs at the expense of its ridiculous contestants. With regard to Burnett and Gibson’s “narrative fundamentalism,” he writes: “they are storytelling revivalists, demanding narrative return to its roots. And they place enormous emphasis on the power of ordeal to seal their pact with reality” (109). Gibson especially comes off as a “revivalist” zealot, depicting a violent religious event and portraying it as brutal reality. Burnett and Gibson each aim to take something contrived and deliver it to their audiences as a realistic, visceral experience.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses art’s tendency to depict suffering, violence, and war in graphic, realistic detail. Analyzing Francisco de Goya’s etching *The Disasters of War*, which depicts the atrocities committed by Napoleon’s army against Spanish rebels in 1808, she writes, “The ghoulish cruelties in *The Disasters of War* are meant to awaken, shock, wound the viewer” (44). Goya’s depiction of the violence puts the viewer
through an intense ordeal; we are shocked into recognizing the pain of others. Sontag also emphasizes the value of art’s authenticity. It is easier to look at a violent image if we can dismiss it as fake or fictionalized, yet when an artist depicts an event “as it was,” the image and its assumed reality gain the power to shock the viewer into attention.

Blume’s purported connection between reality television and *The Passion* holds true only so long as the audience’s acceptance of the “reality” of the work in question is not shaken. If the viewers think the show is scripted, then ratings will drop; the show will have lost its spontaneity in the eyes of the viewer and thus cease to be compelling. If audience members do not believe in Gibson’s portrayal of the Passion, or in the truth of the Passion itself, the film inarguably loses some (if not all) of its power: it becomes torture porn instead of a spiritual meditation. Yet here the functions of the two works seem to diverge, “one heading toward church, the other towards celebrity” (Blume 112). Still, though, Blume asserts the similarity between the two, writing, “But bringing religion into it at this point only clouds the issue. It’s when you put aside the religious content of *The Passion of the Christ* for a moment that Burnett and Gibson have a lot in common” (109). At this point, Blume’s argument loses force, as he has committed the same sin he accuses Gibson of: “cut[ting] through complications, irony, self-reflection” (109). How can one discuss a movie about the Passion of Christ without discussing the religious motivations involved, as well as previous representations of the Passion in art?

Sontag helps again in this regard, as she also examines the history of torture and pain in art in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, highlighting works from ancient Greece (*Laocoon and His Sons*) to 19th-century Spain (Goya’s *The Disasters of War*). Discussing a photograph of the blown-apart face of a World War I soldier, she writes, “Perhaps the only people who have the right to look at such images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it . . . or those who could learn from it” (42). The horror of the photograph is almost impossible to behold, and Gibson’s film certainly belongs in this same category. It is one of the most violent films ever to be shown so widely, to be granted mainstream success despite its depiction of horrific, stomach-turning gore. Blume, as previously stated, believes the film to be nothing more than an “ordeal” designed to shame and shock the viewer, and perhaps that is partly true, but Blume’s criticism does not represent the whole. The film is as shocking as Sontag’s WWI photo, but that also means that we can “learn from it” and help “alleviate” the suffering depicted therein. First, it gives a visual representation of the Passion, the Stations of
the Cross come alive, and the lessons in that Biblical section have much to teach. Second, it depicts a distinctly Catholic perspective of the “alleviation” of Christ’s suffering. By viewing the film, one stands in solidarity, like Simon of Cyrene, with Christ. Other saints like St. Francis of Assisi took part, very literally, in the Passion through the suffering of stigmata and were the better for it. Perhaps modern man does not need to make such a literal sacrifice to understand Jesus’ suffering; instead, recognition of the pain he suffered and compassion for Christ may be enough. Yet there is something even more elemental at work here: suffering itself, the ritual absorption of pain, a constant theme in much religious art, is on display.

Blume ignores the possibility that we might learn from the Passion. He blasts Gibson for not contemplating the theological consequences of portraying Jesus’ death. Yet in his film, Gibson only continues an age-old tradition of depicting violence in order to shock the audience into recognizing Jesus’ suffering. For centuries the Church has promoted solidarity with Christ’s suffering so that followers may participate in the Resurrection through countless pieces of art, especially during the Italian Renaissance, depicting the violence of Christ’s sacrifice. Coincidentally or not, a panel of the Maesta of Duccio in Siena depicts the same scene Gibson illustrates in his film in the graphically violent Flagellum (1308-1311). Blood runs down Christ’s body as a crowd of Pharisees, Romans, and perhaps some disciples whose look of horrible pity and intense emotion we share, look on. Ludovico’s Lamentation (1582) displays Christ’s body laid upon his fainting mother, surrounded by weeping women and St. John. The depiction of Christ’s body is extremely realistic; his hand is broken and his left arm seems dislocated (Sorabella). The Passion visits this same scene with a backwards tracking shot, starting close in on Mary’s tearful, bloodstained face, then slowly pulling further to reveal a tableau of mourners: the Virgin holds her bloody, dead son as St. John and Mary Magdalene mourn next to her. It seems almost to be a painting rather than film; Gibson pays his dues to tradition.

The Renaissance painters used the tools they had to depict the Passion as realistically as possible in order to create a meditation on Christ’s suffering. Gibson achieves the same goal through a different art form: film, perhaps the most powerful medium available today. With its immediate presence, film attacks our senses: the most poignant images are burned into our minds, and, by accessing our memories and imaginations, we can sense everything. Above sight and sound, we can also imagine or recall the textures, smells, and even tastes of the depiction on screen. Gibson’s film exemplifies and implements the sensory power of film. Through its brutal reality, we can feel much that
Christ felt: the blurred vision, the sound of his heavy breathing, the rusty metal of the nails piercing his hands, the smell of blood and sweat, the taste of vinegar. *The Passion* is based in realism, and yet it is a stylized realism designed to optimize our empathy; slow motion emphasizes Christ’s pain, while point of view shots and an access to his visions place us directly in his mind. Through skillful implementation of markedly cinematic techniques, Gibson creates a realistic depiction of Christ’s torture and brings the pain of the ordeal to the fore. Because of film’s arguable power to make us feel more than any other medium, it is perfectly suited for Gibson’s violent, graphic depiction of the Passion.

In fact, Gibson’s is just the latest in a genre of Passion films propagated by great, often controversial directors. Martin Scorsese, raised Catholic, succeeded in his version of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), connecting the viewer to Christ by stressing his humanity. Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, an atheist, made the classic *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964), which depicted the latter half of the gospel, including the Passion. In fact, cinema has produced Passion plays dating as far back as 1897 (Grierson 35).

While rooted firmly in the cinematic Passion genre, Gibson’s film is distinct in its depiction. Yes, he provides a greater context to Christ’s suffering and creates a realistic depiction of the Passion in order to give the audience a devotional image for meditation; there is that noble goal, but there is something else present as well, another driving force. Blume describes an Abu Ghraib photograph in which a “hooded man, recently identified as Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, [stands] on a box, wires fastened to his outstretched arms and genitals, terrified that if he falls off he’ll be electrocuted” (114). This is just one example of the depravity committed in the American prison camp in which guards tortured men suspected of terrorism. Yet what may be the most disturbing part of the photograph is the guard visible in the right of the frame, taking his own picture. The photographers are almost gleeful in their commemoration: “Look what we’ve done!” they seem to say. There is an uneasy similarity in Gibson’s film. He depicts the Passion not as an onlooker but as a participant. His brutal cinematography becomes self-indictment as Christ dies for man’s sins. He, like the guards, participates in a ritual torture, filming it in order keep the memory alive.

*The Passion*, Sontag’s numerous examples of graphic art, the Renaissance paintings, and the Abu Ghraib photographs all immortalize suffering. Yet there is another question that these works are pondering, one that Blume and Sontag fail to explore. They ask as we would: “What is the meaning of all this suffering?” The Abu Ghraib guards might have felt torture to be a form of
pay-back for previous sins committed against their country. Gibson might say Christ’s Passion is redemption for man’s sins. There is an uneasy similarity between the two. For both, inflicted suffering is too easily attributed to unexamined notions of justice and reward.

Pope John Paul II explores a similar dilemma in his Apostolic Letter “Salvifici Doloris.” Citing Job as a man of suffering, he writes, “It is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment.” He suggests something contrary to the motivation of the guards and perhaps even of Gibson: that suffering is not always part of justice. This limited notion of the nature of suffering may be a post-modern idea, rather than a theological one. Suffering does not necessarily result in a meaningless world, however; it can present opportunities for purification. Gibson shows how Christ’s suffering allows for such purification, but what we glimpse seems insufficient. Because we all suffer, we all can enact purification for ourselves. Christ is not the only one who can suffer viably. Perhaps the question should not be the impossible “why is there suffering?” but the more tangible “how should we suffer?”

In such light, The Passion becomes not only a devotional film but a documentation of perseverance in the face of suffering, the glorification of a universal theme. Gibson’s Jesus is not so much a teacher or religious leader as he is a soldier who marches on in the face of death and pain. He provides a model of fortitude, of faith in the future. The risen Christ’s appearance in The Passion lasts only a few moments, yet the inclusion is key, completing the arc of suffering that leads to transformation. This model challenges us all: religious, atheist, anything in between. We must ask how we can use our own, non-fictive ordeals to save ourselves, instead of relying on a divine sacrificial lamb.

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