For One Catholic, 'Passion' Skews the Meaning of the Crucifixion

By MARY GORDON

The Passion of the Christ" is not just another movie. No one in America is saying, "What do you want to see this weekend, `The Passion of the Christ' or `50 First Dates'?" None of us can see it innocently. If audiences were juries, there is no possible viewer of this film who would not be rejected by either the defense or the prosecution.

Whether or not we like the 21st century, it is where we live, and we can view this film only as citizens of our time and place. That means me, too. I can look at "The Passion of the Christ" only as a woman who defines herself as Catholic, who also defines herself as someone for whom the creation of story has been a crucial locus of self-understanding, and as someone for whom the Gospels have been crucial texts. So I respond to it as a person formed by my history, as Mel Gibson has been formed by his.

I'm older than Mel, but not by much, and we were both brought up by Catholics who would define themselves as conservative. And yet our visions of both the nature of history, the role of story and the experience of Jesus are miles apart.

So, no, I didn't like the movie. But I didn't like Mr. Gibson's "Braveheart," either. I don't do spectacle. I don't do graphic violence. I didn't lose any sleep, though, about not liking "Braveheart." I didn't care about "Braveheart"; I didn't care who liked it because nothing important was at stake. I didn't imagine that "Braveheart" could do any damage in the larger world. The story of "Braveheart" wasn't precious to me. But "The Passion" has been, for me, a cause of deep distress.

My distress has two sources. The first is my anxiety that it will have the effect of fanning the flames of a growing worldwide anti-Semitism. I accept Mr. Gibson's assertion that he didn't mean to make an anti-Semitic film, but he has to be aware of the Passion story's role in the history of the persecution of the Jews, a story whose very power to move the human spirit has been a vehicle for both transcendence and murder. To be a Christian is to face the responsibility for one's own most treasured sacred texts being used to justify the deaths of innocents.

What, then, is one to do with that knowledge? I believe that one bears witness to it, in one's life and in one's work. Certainly one does not take the risk that one's life or work might contribute to the continuation of a horror.

Can this be read as political correctness with a theological twist? As a writer, I am certainly sensitive to the specter of censorship. But as one who has made a life's work of studying narrative, I wonder why Mel Gibson's vision of the Passion — its importance to him, he says, is that it shows exactly what Jesus did for us — must depend on a portrayal of Jews as a bloodthirsty mob headed by a sadistic and politically manipulative leadership?

Mr. Gibson's defense is that he tells it like it is. Or like it was. But that is not precisely the case: the film's screenwriter, Benedict Fitzgerald, has added extra-Scriptural details: the character of Claudia, Pilate's wife, is much amplified from the Gospel hint; Pilate is given a sympathetic psychological complexity that is nowhere found in the Gospels; details of Jesus' childhood have been invented for
dramatic purposes. Caiphas, the high priest, is a cipher in the Scripture; in the film he is, compared with Pilate, a one-dimensional monster, a shrewd rabble-rouser who rejoices in the shedding of his enemy's blood.

It is true that the Roman flagellators are portrayed as viciously sadistic, but there are two good Romans, Pilate and Claudia, to add a counterweight to our understanding of Romanness. There is no counterweight to the portrayal of the Jews. And arguably a writer who is concerned about the effects of a work that will have enormous popularity might be more worried about a negative portrayal of Jews than of Romans. No one has tried to set fire to the Pantheon; Hadrian's Villa has not been ransacked.

The second cause of my distress is that Mr. Gibson's portrayal of the Passion story seems to me a perversion of the meaning of the event and its context. When I spoke to Mr. Fitzgerald, he told me that for him and for Mr. Gibson, the Passion was the most important part of the Gospel and that that was why they had focused on the last hours of Jesus' life, giving short shrift to his ministry and his ideas. But if, as Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Gibson have done, you take the Passion out of its context, you are left with a Jesus who is much more body than spirit; you are presented not with the author of the Beatitudes or the man who healed the sick but with a carcass to be flayed.

A great deal of screen time is taken up with the flagellation of Jesus. What does this accomplish in an understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life and death? How is Jesus different from any other victim of torture? How is "The Passion of the Christ" different, then, from "The Silence of the Lambs"? Jesus as a person with mind and spirit is not very present in this film. This may partly be because Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus, is not an actor of great psychological subtlety. In the scenes when he is ministering rather than being bloodied, he is merely bland. These scenes have a perfunctory, tacked on quality, and Mr. Caviezel's face, which is pleasant but vacuous at the Last Supper, for example, does nothing to add to their power.

When I asked Mr. Fitzgerald why they had made the film so violent, he said that in an age of great violence, you had to use violence to make your point. He told me a story that had been dear to both his mother, who was the editor of Flannery O'Connor's letters and a great friend, and to O'Connor herself. The story goes like this: A man buys a mule from another man, who tells him that the mule will do anything if he is treated with loving kindness. So the man gives the mule the best feed, then some sugar, but he still won't work. So he brings it back to the seller, saying he's been duped. The seller hits the mule on the head with a two-by-four. The buyer says, "But you said he needed to be treated with loving kindness." The seller says, "Yes, but you have to get his attention first."

My problem with "The Passion of the Christ" is that I felt as if I were being continually hit over the head with a two-by-four, but I never tasted the sugar and I wasn't even given my portion of healthy feed. Once my attention was grabbed, what was it I was supposed to hear? That Jesus suffered greatly for my sins, more greatly, perhaps than I should imagine. But who is this Jesus and what is the meaning of his suffering?

Theologically, the meaning of Jesus' death comes with the triumph of the Resurrection, arguably the weakest scene in the film, in which Mr. Caviezel looks not victorious but stoned. Yet St. Paul says, "If Christ has not risen, then vain is your faith." Psychologically, the power of the Passion is that it acknowledges the place of suffering, particularly unjust suffering, in human life. It is a vessel for our grief. If you listen to Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," there is very little violence in the music; the overwhelming tone is one of mournfulness and a kind of crushed sorrow. In the film, to be sure, there are shots of women weeping along the Via Dolorosa, but the dominant tone in the film is one of rage-inducing voyeurism.

I understand that people of good faith might be moved by the film. I was in Boston the day of the premiere, Ash Wednesday. A woman interviewed on local television said that she thought the movie was not about violence but about love, that when she saw Jesus' struggle with his cross, she saw her own. A minute later, though, a woman with ashes on her forehead looked into the camera and said, "At least
we know who really killed Jesus, and I don't have to say who."

I would venture to say that neither of these women's vision of the world was changed by the film. They brought their own Jesus into the movie with them, their own religious history and their understanding of the history of the world. As, of course, did I. And so if Mr. Gibson's goal was to change hearts and minds, I can't believe he'll be successful. In his goal of being true to his vision, he may in fact have succeeded.

But how does his vision tie in with the vision of the Gospels as a whole? In the Beatitudes, Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst after justice. I can't imagine that Mr. Gibson's vision or his film will add to the balance of this world's justice. But as he has told us, that's not the part of the Gospel that interests him.

Mary Gordon's most recent book was "Joan of Arc" (Viking/Penguin, 2000).