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Vol. 1: The Bloody Faithful
by Brian Crane



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SYNOPTIQUE QUESTIONS

A few years ago, I went to see the Patriotes' memorial in the cemetery at St.-Denis-sur-Richelieu. Before leaving I poked my head into the church, where I was told by a friend that the crucifix had been repainted. As a boy, he had spent Sunday mornings sitting with his family under the very bloody Christ that still hung from the crucifix. Now seeing it years later, most of the blood he remembered was gone. (*Ergo* it must have been repainted.) To me there still seemed to be plenty of blood, but then I was raised in rural Baptist churches and was more accustomed to bare crosses and folding chairs than to statuettes and pews. The possibility that this was a cleaned up image startled me.

The next bloody Christ to leave its mark on me appeared in *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*. As we all remember, he was served up with a healthy dose of outrage at the film's graphic violence and purported anti-semitism. *Synoptique 1* added to the noise with a *PASSION* bibliography and Michael Baker's article on *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST*. For a few months at least, everyone I knew in Montréal and around Concordia seemed to talk about nothing but Jesus.

Now it's a year later. *THE PASSION* has been released on DVD, a less violent cut of the film (the "repainted" edition) has gone nowhere at the box office, and things seem to be getting back to normal.



THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

I first saw *THE PASSION* at the Paramount in downtown Montréal after being pressured by friends. It was three or four weeks into the initial release and I went to a weekday matinee, so I was surprised to find the theatre full. I was even more surprised when the jaded urbanite audience I had assumed filled the theatre sobbed its way through the last half of the film.

I'll admit several reaction shots of a distraught Mary chocked me up pretty bad. Still, in the end, I was too caught up in the way the film kept situating itself as a literal presentation of the gospel narratives to have anything but a detached, analytical response. I felt like ticking events and verses off in my head as the movie went along. Pulled out his beard? Check. Spat and laughed? Check. No bone of his body broken? Check. The very literalness of the adaptation made me want to stand back and judge this film in terms of its interpretation of the source text.

This literality—dare I call it faithfulness?—of the adaptation should have come as no surprise: Gibson and his supporters had repeatedly insisted this was a key aspect of the film. The literal, in other words, was taken for granted in the production and distribution of this film. What are we to make of this?

The beginnings of an answer can be found by taking a brief detour to consider Pier Paolo Pasolini's *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, which became available on DVD in Canada during the lag between *THE PASSION*'s theatrical and DVD releases through a coincidence of production schedules.

Like Gibson's film, Pasolini's is based largely on Matthew's gospel. Also like Gibson's film, it is an explicitly literal adaptation of this text. In Pasolini's case this is taken to extremes. With only one or two exceptions, if you can't read a statement on the page of your Bible, it is not spoken in the film. This pattern of dialogue-as-citation is further emphasized by a voice-over that recites important verses. Pasolini selects events and makes minor alterations in their sequences, but otherwise, his interpretive intervention is limited to casting, staging, montage, and choice of soundtrack. The result is an austere, strangely silent film that is full of words.



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW

Of course, the films are also wildly different. *THE PASSION* is about a bloody suffering body. It is a horror film and a melodrama. *THE GOSPEL* gives us a neo-realist portrait of a distant, troubled preacher's powerful charisma and social message. More generally, *THE PASSION* was understood by critics (and probably its supporters) to express a retrograde conservative message, while *THE GOSPEL* was taken as a left revision of the Christ (though it took the Church a bit of time to decide this was the case and withdraw their initial praise). In other words, these two equally literal adaptations could not be more different.



THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

So does the comparison make sense as anything other than a stunt? Is it legit to set a gay-bashing outside-the-fold Catholic's image of the gospels beside a gay and bashed outside-the-fold Catholic's image of the gospels? Or does this simply add more fuel to the everything's-relative-and-basically-a-matter-of-your-point-of-view fire by showing yet again that even the literal boils down to personal opinion? In the coming issues of *Synoptique*, this column will try to think through the relationship between film and literature by exploring questions like these.

But for the record, I think the comparison between *THE PASSION*'s and the *THE GOSPEL*'s faithfulness is rock-solid. And my reasons why are related to the bloody Christ hanging in the church in St.-Denis.

Like that statue, these films are involved in an on-going effort to understand and interpret texts that founded vast swaths of world art and culture. Like that statue, these films embrace the priority of these texts, interpret what these texts mean, and, thus, raise questions that transcend the cinematic.

What are the gospels? Who do they tell us we are? What do they tell us we might be? These—and others I won't list—are "Big Questions" that men and women have chewed over for two millennia. That's a long time, but these films' attention to their source reveals that these questions are alive today. These films do interpretation. More importantly, both figure their interpretations as self-consciously faithful adaptation. Faithful adaptation in these films thus indicates *not* the clarity of a fixed text, but instead the contradictory and meaningful life of these ancient texts in the modern world.

Faithfulness, thus, pulls the cinematic and the literary together in order to address fundamental cultural questions. These questions transcend the disciplinary boundaries of cinema, just as they transcend the bounds of literature. Addressing them is, ultimately, what makes cinema and literature worthwhile. But doing so extends the reach of cinema beyond the limits of the modern era by linking its work to the concerns and texts that ground humanistic study.



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW

What I'm suggesting is that *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*, like *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, is an important film. Not sociologically, not anthropologically, not culturally. Or at least not only in these ways. It is important because it is a film of ideas. What's more, its ideas—whether we love them or hate them—are not simply "significant"; they are foundational and compelling. We must address them. But to address them means meeting their challenge, engaging them rather than discussing them, even as Gibson fails to match our portrait of an artist nor his film our ideals and beliefs. In other words, this film asks filmgoers to think beyond ourselves.

That's exciting.

So stay tuned. Future installments of this column will try to sort out how films use the literary to broaden the scope of the cinema and bring its resources to bear on large-scale questions of Art and Culture—and even how they (and we) figure out what the hell "large-scale questions of Art and Culture" are.

Brian Crane wrote about Stan Brakhage and cellphones in SYNOPTIQUE 8.

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