

# Love In The Time of Calvary: Romance and Family Values in Crucifixion Films

Brian Walter (*Cineaction* 88 2012)

While marketing his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson pointedly shared anecdotes about the Muslims and agnostics among his film crew who converted to Christianity during the filming. Previewing his already controversial film for conservative Christian leaders across America before its official Ash Wednesday release, Gibson essentially offered it up as a weapon that they could use in the ‘red state/blue state’ culture wars to win converts to Christ. These anecdotes constituted just one element of Gibson’s clever “guerilla marketing” campaign,<sup>1</sup> which rather remarkably helped what might otherwise have remained little more than an art-house curiosity—with its remote historical and geographical setting, no stars, and English subtitles to translate the two dead languages used for dialogue—earn more than \$600 million at the box office and qualify as an improbable blockbuster.<sup>2</sup>

Or so it could easily seem. When considered within the longer history of Hollywood’s treatments of Biblical material, the success not only seems much less improbable, but actually almost predictable. At least since D. W. Griffith and the early days of feature films, filmmakers had regularly looked to well-known literature for story material in general and to Biblical stories in particular as conveniently pious vehicles for the revealing costumes, grandiloquent dialogue, and massive crowd pageantry so indispensable to the genre.<sup>3</sup> If Cecil B. DeMille is most famous today for establishing Charlton Heston as a WASP icon by casting him as Moses and having him intone the voice of God in his extravagant 1956 Technicolor version of *The Ten Commandments*,<sup>4</sup> it helps to recall that DeMille began mounting his spectacular visions of the Bible several decades earlier, in the silent era, following Griffith’s example in *Intolerance* with a 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments* and then, a few years later, conjuring a frankly Salomesque version of Mary Magdalene for Jesus to convert in 1927’s *King of Kings*. Its venerability may spark debate, but the Biblical epic certainly boasts a long history, suggesting its enduring appeal for American audiences.

The mid-century renaissance of Hollywood’s “swords and sandals” epics shows how well the genre could adapt both to industry anxieties and to America’s popular self-image. After losing control over the exhibition of its product and finding itself on the losing end of demographic shifts that saw fewer and fewer Americans going to the movies as their primary source of entertainment, Hollywood resorted increasingly to costly color and widescreen technologies in an effort to maintain its profits, emphasizing the technical superiority of the theatrical film experience over the increasingly ubiquitous home television.<sup>5</sup> The Biblical epic lent itself superbly to the “big event pictures” that Hollywood produced to keep audiences coming to theatres,<sup>6</sup> and not only because of the visual splendors available in depicting the glory that was imperial Rome or the majesty of pharaonic Egypt. The genre similarly supported the melodrama of erotic love striving for mastery with family identity or, still more, with spiritual duty. Heston’s Moses is a prince of Egypt who spurns the powerful princess Nefretiri first to save the otherwise helpless slaves and then to marry a humble shepherd woman from the countryside whom he later also abandons (in effect), the better to fulfill his divinely-ordained mission by leading the Hebrews out of bondage and to the Promised Land. So, in addition to championing American ideals of freedom in the face of oppression,

DeMille's *Ten Commandments* catered to conservative white America's image of itself as a piously disciplined and wholesome alternative to the corruptions of urban life and inherited power, precisely at a time when white middle-class Americans were increasingly abandoning urban centers for the suburbs.<sup>7</sup>

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* does not fall simply and easily into an unbroken line of Hollywood Biblical epics such as *The Ten Commandments*, but it does mine a vein of conservative Christian separatism that Hollywood had sought to tap going back at least to the 1930 establishment of the Motion Picture Production Code, which represented an "attempt to bind movies to Judeo-Christian morality."<sup>8</sup> Gibson's entry retains and/or reproduces several core characteristics of the genre, particularly the rules that require love plots entangled with the Christ story to emphasize a conflict between selfish earthly desires and grandly selfless acceptance of higher callings. The women—including, on occasion, even the Virgin Mary—in these story lines tempt men to reject spiritual or otherwise higher imperatives. The specific circumstances and even the results differ, but the age-old association of femaleness with the lower, bodily faculties and maleness with higher, intellectual, spiritual motives prevails, in some form, across the decades in these films.

To connect Gibson's notoriously brutal scenario to the long history of Biblical epics, it is useful to compare its treatment of love plots to similar subplots in two earlier Crucifixion films, *The Robe* (1953) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). In *The Robe*, the oldest and most generically conventional of these films, Diana, the female lead, finally joins her male counterpart, Tribune Marcellus Gallio, in defying the young new emperor Caligula and embracing a beatified martyrdom; though she strives earnestly to lure Gallio away from his staunch religious commitment—offering the joys of marriage and domestic life as an alternative—Diana finally and heroically gives up this dream for her own conversion, wedding political independence to spiritual apotheosis in a way that seems surprisingly progressive in comparison to the later films. Just as surprisingly, though from a different angle, it is *The Last Temptation of Christ*—the object of a remarkably potent and successful right-wing Christian protest—that proves perhaps the most philosophically conservative of the three, forcing Jesus simply and consistently to reject the women who love him to become the Messiah, embracing his identity as the son of God only by dismissing the flesh and the women who so temptingly embody it for him. Finally, in *The Passion of the Christ*, the quasi-allegorical relationship between Pontius Pilate and his unhappy wife, Claudia, serves to confirm comfortable truisms about the conflict between love and moral duty needing to resolve itself decisively (however painfully) in favor of the latter.

The oldest of these films, *The Robe*, was made as an event film from top to bottom, but it also bears clear marks of Hollywood's self-doubts in the early Cold War era. The first film presented in the new CinemaScope aspect ratio, *The Robe* also boasted glorious Technicolor processing and stereophonic sound at a time when Hollywood was already (according to conventional wisdom) losing much of its viewership to the popular new home television set. But beyond its technological advances, *The Robe* betrays Hollywood's political anxieties in the 1950s, finding in the story of a dissolute Roman tribune's conversion to Christianity what would seem to be a rather unlikely paean to the heroic, solitary champion of democratic freedoms rebelling against the suffocating forces of inherited and centralized power. Tribune Marcellus Gallio finds himself in the film's second act in Palestine commanding the Roman soldiers who crucify Christ and barter his fateful robe at the foot of the cross in the midst of a gathering storm. Driven mad by his contact with the robe, Marcellus only finds relief when he converts to Christianity, returning to Rome in the film's

final act to antagonize and finally reject the authority of the spoiled, whiny, sexually suspect Caligula, who, as emperor, sentences Marcellus to execution at the very end of the movie. Debuting in 1953, a few years before its more famous Biblical epic counterpart, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Robe* anticipates the later film's improbable treatment of the Old Testament Exodus as a story of heroically devout rebels taking a stand for liberty and democratic freedoms by ascribing egalitarian virtues to a scion of the Roman empire who bravely turns against the privilege of his upbringing.<sup>9</sup>

*The Robe* also shares with *The Ten Commandments* the figure of the female outsider who falls in love with the eventual man of God before his conversion and who later finds herself spurned for the sake of his higher, divine calling. From her debut in the Roman marketplace, Diana is both Roman subject and critic, an outsider whose dress, movements, and placement within the public space offer Marcellus an alternative to the decadence and cynicism that otherwise prevails. The film opens with a montage sequence of pagan statues and marching soldiers that takes full advantage of the elongated CinemaScope frame to overwhelm viewers with the simultaneous glory and corruption of imperial Rome. The montage sequence ends with Marcellus's debut, wandering through the market, perusing slaves for possible purchase. Diana eventually appears behind him, and the busy mise-en-scène of the flesh market around Marcellus immediately gives way to calm and clarity around this woman who remains on the margins. The cross-cutting in the conversation that ensues and the camera placement of the subsequent auction scene between Marcellus and Caligula (not yet emperor) continue to emphasize Diana's alienation from the sordid business of the place.

Subsequent scenes work to establish a subtly mixed status for Diana: both a loyal Roman subject and an independent spirit devoted to Marcellus even in his eventual madness. She combines these two seemingly incompatible traits perhaps most markedly in the scene when Marcellus returns from Palestine (his grip on sanity already loosening) and she presents him to the old emperor. Displacing the classical architecture, colorful robes, and stately dialogue into the remote countryside, far from the political bodies and flesh peddlers of Rome, this sequence offers the best of both worlds to contemporary conservative Christian viewers, shunning the corruption of the city for the idyllic retreat of a rural life which nevertheless supports civilized, even decorous behavior. Diana is at her best in this setting, reconciling her duties as a Roman subject to the emperor (who, like his wife, would prefer to see her marry their son, Caligula) with her ardent faithfulness to a rebellious tribune. Diana waits for Marcellus on a stone bench overlooking a cliff that drops away to the sea, a bracing setting for Marcellus's return and the fateful incorporation of the life-changing experience he has had in Palestine into the progress of their love. In her previous two scenes, both set in Rome, Diana appeared in wraps and head-coverings, protected not so much against the weather as from the dangers of imperial decadence, but here, with the striking stonework of a Roman house crowning the hill behind, she appears openly in an off-the-shoulder yellow gown, arm-band, and head-dress, a noblewoman of the empire free to the elements. Here in this outpost, Marcellus releases Diana from her commitment to him—a freedom she pointedly does not accept, instead rushing to take his hand as he heads back to the house to report to the emperor. She serves, in fact, as his go-between, risking the emperor's wrath to spare Marcellus from exposing his addled state (caused by his contact with Christ's robe). And when the emperor follows Marcellus's example at the end of their interview by freeing her from her promise to the beleaguered tribune, Diana refuses once again, a prelude to her final rejection of Caligula at the end of the movie when she elects to join Marcellus in martyrdom. In the midst of his madness—the first step toward his conversion and

beatification—Marcellus can no longer fulfill his duties as subject of the empire unless Diana runs interference for him. She puts herself at risk to rescue his interview with the emperor, who thinks she deserves more: “What a wife you would make for an emperor,” he says, shaking his head over her devotion to Marcellus. She chooses long-time, innocent love over power, letting her man leave to heal himself before returning to her. In her brave faithfulness, standing by her almost helpless man, Diana somehow confirms the timelessness of middle-class American family values.

But she is still a woman in love, of course. Though she lets him leave to seek healing away from her, Diana will not simply cede Marcellus to his new religion, championing their love over his devotion to his new god when he finally returns to Rome as a staunch Christian convert. The crucial element in this version of the old enmity between love and spiritual duty is Diana’s ability and willingness to reconcile these usually implacable antagonists, the *mis-en-scène* combining with the dialogue to affirm his conversion by incorporating it into their relationship, sanctifying their love and prefiguring their joint martyrdom. Though she has not even heard from him in a year, Diana settles for a chaste hug when Marcellus finally appears among his fellow converts in their hiding place in the catacombs beneath the city, accepting a prolonged lover’s kiss only once they have withdrawn into an inner chamber where they are alone. When Marcellus kneels before her, head bowed, clasping her hands in a suppliant’s position, Diana initially dismisses his religion as a fantasy: “What you told me was a beautiful story, but it just isn’t true. Justice and charity—men will never accept such a philosophy. The world isn’t like that. It never has been and it never will be.” But when Marcellus responds by confirming his conversion and determination to save Demetrius, the former slave who has helped convert him (“I owe him a great deal more than my life”), Diana in her turn offers the still more crucial response; pulling back to bow her own head and touch her forehead to his, Diana submits her desires to his devotion: “If your god means that much to you, I won’t stand in your way. I want to be your wife, whatever you believe. I’d marry you if I had to share you with a thousand gods.” Immediately upon this declaration, a servant enters the hitherto private chamber to announce that everything is ready for Marcellus to lead his fellow Christians into the emperor’s dungeons and free Demetrius (their ‘brother’). Diana’s righteous (if reluctant) acceptance of Marcellus’s higher call is the last piece to fall into place for the act of spiritual heroism that is to follow. Marcellus entrusts the fateful robe to her as he leaves, implying that this already self-sacrificing woman is now as responsible for the faith’s future in Rome as he is.

The last time Diana and Marcellus appear alone together—Marcellus in prison on the eve of his trial—the choice between love and spiritual call is still more urgent. Diana begs Marcellus not to defy Caligula and go thereby to certain death, even arguing that his god does not want him to die. She adds that she wants to believe and live without fear, but that she cannot do so without him, for the moment setting her love for him above his faith. She exits on that plea, leaving the camera to linger on Marcellus frozen in place, having to decide (apparently) between his devotion to Jesus and his love for Diana. The pay-off, of course, comes in the climactic trial scene, when she requests the robe from Marcellus after Caligula recoils from it. Diana then follows Marcellus’s example by refusing the new emperor a final time and willingly joining Marcellus in martyrdom. As the two walk hand-in-hand out of the palace through the colorfully-costumed masses, the image dissolves to show them still walking, but now amid a blue sky, beatified in their joint sacrifice.

Diana thus finally serves to complete and even certify the nobility of Marcellus’s choice at the same time that she demonstrates her own spiritual attunement and capacity, an unusual

affirmation of the ability of femaleness to respond appropriately and meaningfully to spiritual imperative and even to supply means that their male counterparts lack. Nevertheless, Diana's choices confirm the larger incompatibility of the flesh and the spirit central to this genre; they can unite only in death.

Three-and-a-half decades later, conservative Christians fought successfully to keep a film out of theaters for its purportedly radical image of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Well before Universal Pictures officially released Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in August of 1988, the film had sparked widespread resistance and helped to galvanize a union between right-wing political groups and conservative Christians that had periodically been assailing Hollywood as a den of iniquity going back to the pre-Code era. Some protesters of *The Last Temptation* repeated old, ugly charges laid at Hollywood's feet in the 1930s, that the studios were run by Jews unfriendly to middle America's Christian sensibilities, God-denying flesh-peddlers who merely capitalized on the wayward public's lustful impulses.<sup>11</sup> Although it appeared a few years before Dan Quayle famously delivered his 'family values' speech,<sup>12</sup> Scorsese's film clearly piqued the champions of patriarchal, literalist brands of Christianity that placed the father at the godhead of the nuclear family household with the wife and children serving to confirm his authority.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the Reagan-Bush era's 'family values' agenda, the sins that Scorsese's film committed are unmistakable: he allowed Jesus to appear more as a man of fallible, tempted flesh than as an icon of sacramental blood and spangle-eyed platitudes, along the way treating the canonical story so frankly that it earned the first R-rating ever for a film about Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Following Kazantzakis's emphasis on the battle between flesh and spirit, Scorsese shows Jesus agonizing over the divine call, even constructing crosses for the Romans' crucifixion of Jews in his desperation to make God leave him alone. Jesus also appears wholly naked during the scourging and on the cross, his genitals (such a source of interest in their infant form for medieval painters) unprotected by the traditional loincloth. But it is the dream sequence near the end of the film which delivers the crowning insults. Jesus appears naked again, finally having sex with his beloved Mary Magdalene in a shadowy honeymoon hut, just the prelude, as it turns out, to a hypothetical scenario in which the son of God begets (after Mary Magdalene's death) children upon both Mary and her sister Martha, a happy and remarkably fruitful bigamist. Although the rumors that circulated about the licentiousness of the film's Jesus seem seldom to have understood or known the details of his characterization, the rumor of so tangibly available and frankly sensual a savior were more than enough to rouse concerted and highly successful protests.<sup>15</sup>

The irony of this conservative resistance is that Scorsese's characterization of Jesus celebrates middle-class family life and (more disturbingly) serves up a frankly misogynistic portrayal of women and femaleness as an unending temptation that men must ultimately reject to get closer to God. Any conventionally simplified reading of Eve as the corrupter of Adam will find ample confirmation in Scorsese's film, where Mary Magdalene appears first in a fetishized close-up of her racily decorated feet and later seeks to seduce him away from his quest to find God in the desert. Later, during Jesus's desert sojourn, the serpent appears outside Jesus's circle and speaks with Mary Magdalene's voice, trying to tempt the reluctant savior by promising that he can be transported instantly to bed with her. And the last temptation that Jesus faces is offered by Satan in the guise of a curly blond-haired girl who claims to be his guardian angel, tempting him down from the cross by offering him the possibility of wedded bliss with Mary Magdalene, and then helping him replace his first dead wife with not one but two women who give him many children; this Jesus, it would seem,

amply honors the Old Testament charge to go forth and multiply. When Jesus initially hesitates to accept the embraces of his sister-in-law Mary, his guardian demon-angel repeats a line she has already used to help him accept his marriage to Mary Magdalene: “There is only one woman in the world, with a thousand faces.” It finally takes an angry, aged Judas to pull Jesus away from his various corrupting Eves and back onto the straight and narrow, limping to his death bed to denounce Jesus’s abdication of divine responsibility: “What are you doing here? What business do you have here with women, with children? What’s good for a man isn’t good for God.” If it weren’t for the violence and the sex that earned the film its R-rating, *The Last Temptation* could easily adapt to the most conservatively patriarchal Christian dogmas.

An early sequence of scenes involving Jesus and Mary Magdalene emphasizes the threat that earthly love poses to the divine imperative in *The Last Temptation*. After the opening crucifixion scene, Jesus prepares to head out into the wilderness to make peace with the agonizing calls he feels, which leave him writhing in the dust in pain. But he does not get far before he realizes that he first has to make peace with his former childhood love, Magdalene,<sup>16</sup> detouring to the busy marketplace of Magdala where men of various ethnicities line up for her services in what would become known as the “brothel scene.”<sup>17</sup> In Kazantzakis’s novel, Jesus remains outside the brothel waiting for his chance to speak with Magdalene, but Scorsese puts him inside where he will not only see her having sex with a remarkably numerous crowd of customers, but even decline his turn when one of them gestures to him. When he is finally alone with Magdalene, who still lies naked on the bed, Jesus approaches slowly, asking her forgiveness for making her hate God. In the subsequent exchanges between the two, first at bedside, then outside under the stars, Magdalene both tempts and taunts Jesus, exposing her breasts to him on the bed, asking him to take her body, placing his hand between her legs, and finally—when it is clear that she cannot seduce him—inviting him to stay the night with her before he resumes his spiritual quest, adding that he will “still be a virgin for the desert.” She sets her desire for him against his determination to end his spiritual torment by finding God—and she loses, the film thus affirming the conventional incompatibility of love with spiritual duty.

What makes this conventional treatment surprising is the film’s clear (and often successful) efforts to revolutionize and modernize crucial aspects of Jesus’s and his followers’ story. It would be possible, for example, to argue that Magdalene’s love for Jesus informs his moral ascension and that, moreover, she herself gives over her love to become one of his two disciples who best accept the sacrifice he has to make. Barbara Hershey, the actress who played Mary Magdalene, has praised Scorsese for allowing her character to appear with the disciples during Jesus’s ministry and even at the Last Supper, from which the Magdalene traditionally is absent.<sup>18</sup> And in the final triumph, when Jesus returns to the cross to proclaim his life and earthly ministry finished, the reaction shot of the Magdalene confirms not only his sacrifice, but her acceptance of her own. In these and other details, Mary Magdalene certainly assumes dimensions that she traditionally has not had in most Hollywood characterizations, informing and underscoring the ascendancy of Jesus’s decisions in much the way that the film’s Judas serves as Jesus’s partner, even as Christ’s conscience, the special disciple whom Jesus seeks out for late-night discussion of the meaning of his ministry and life. Mary Magdalene, like Judas, enjoys a special relationship with Jesus, a crucial source of support on his way to the cross.

But even in this revisionist pairing with Judas, Mary Magdalene galvanizes the association of femaleness with the body, which ultimately (as always) has to bow to the mind and spirit in

the man of God. When Judas appears in the last temptation reverie, he hobbles up toward the old, dying Jesus prostrate on his mat to abjure the erstwhile Savior's choice, showing no tenderness toward or even interest in the failing body of his beloved friend, Jesus's embodied conscience arrived to lash him for moral cowardice one final time. Judas's behavior and responsibility in the temptation contrast sharply with those of his female counterpart earlier in the reverie, when she withdraws into the honeymoon hut and holds her new husband in her lap while tending to his wounds and cleansing his body of blood as a prelude to their lovemaking. Even in the reverie, Magdalene focuses on Jesus's body, leaving his mind and spirit to Judas. The love of a woman in *The Last Temptation* may be beautiful and even essential, but it remains an obstacle to or, at best, a marker Jesus passes on his way toward exaltation.

The remarkable success that conservative Christians had in debarring Scorsese's film from wide release in 1988 ironically anticipated the remarkable success some sixteen years later of Mel Gibson's savage vision of the last twelve hours of Christ's life. If WASP-ish America had long distrusted Hollywood, here, finally, was a movie that would put the dream factory's resources to compelling use in the service of a conservative Christian agenda. The success of this famously brutal film suggests the depth of its patrons' sense of victimization, their alienation from "mainstream culture". Gibson holds the body of Jesus up for a different kind of erotic spectacle, a test of physical endurance to leave the audience cheering at the end for resolve above and beyond the call of any but the highest duty. In the infamous scourging scene, Jesus takes the best flogging the Roman soldiers have to offer and then rises to his feet again in a display of outrageously macho humility, ready for a second round of fantastically prolonged flagellation.

But if Gibson's film breaks decisively from tradition by making Jesus's triumph almost entirely physical, surviving an ordeal that no human body could plausibly endure, it too propagates staple precepts of the genre about the incompatibility of earthly or human love with a higher call. In this case, the old antinomy prevails particularly in the characterization of Pontius Pilate and his wife, Claudia. Gibson's Pilate is a calm and fundamentally humane politician who manages not to sentence Jesus to the cross directly, instead finally giving in to the high priest's and the restless mob's call for crucifixion only in hopes of avoiding an uprising and much more widespread bloodshed. Most importantly, in turning Jesus over for crucifixion, Pilate goes against the strenuous wishes of his wife, Claudia, whom he asks, "Do you see the truth?", and who replies affirmatively: she knows it is wrong to have this Galilean crucified. Once again, then, the male authority figure has to choose between a woman's wishes and what he sees as the morally right (or the least morally objectionable) choice. Pilate has to send Jesus off to Golgotha, of course, so the imperative he is following is actually God's, as Jesus reminds him at a moment when Pilate, still lost, is groping for a way out of his impossible situation. The upshot of this irresolvable disagreement between the visionary wife and the reluctantly politic husband who defies her wishes is to make the rabble who insist on Jesus's execution all the more ugly and insufferable. Love complicates and even opposes duty, but duty will out.

Pilate's and Claudia's debut scene subtly establishes the dependable antagonism between (feminized) love and higher duty. The scene establishes a mystical but unmistakably eroticized connection between the consul's wife and the soon-to-be-crucified savior, a rather unlikely attachment that may seem displaced in the way it targets her husband, but which becomes all the more earnest and potent for doing so. This scene and the subsequent ones featuring Claudia perpetuate an image of inarticulate female spirituality blending indissolubly

with erotic response and desire, the woman in this case recognizing and finding herself drawn to the authentic Man of God instinctively but uselessly, incapable of acting upon or even fully expressing the truth she clings doggedly to—that her husband should not condemn ‘the Galilean’.

The scene begins with a cut from the Virgin Mother watching her son being escorted to the temple in chains to a full shot of Pilate in his strikingly lit bedchamber, examining a scroll by candle light amid the shadowy columns and gauzy curtains. Distracted by a soft sound from within, the thoughtful husband puts down the scroll (the emblem of official business) to investigate, the source of the sound remaining unseen as he pushes deeper inside the curtains, bathed in blue and the soft orange glow of the lantern light. A low-angle medium shot of Pilate pushing aside the last curtain (but not bodily violating the apparently sacred space where his wife sleeps) cuts to a deeply-shadowed point-of-view shot that illuminates only what appears to be coverings at the edge of a bed in the lower left of the screen and a bit of the stone floor and a column in the upper right. A knock at the door startles the transfixed consul, who glances in alarm over his left shoulder, but then looks back to the shadowed space where his wife lies in troubled sleep, the soft blue lighting from the left picking up what appear to be beads of sweat on his cheek, his eyes now mostly in shadow even as the light picks out his colorful tunic. He moves smartly to the double-doors and pulls them open to reveal his commander, Abenader, prompting a sharp cut to the pay-off shot, Claudia in profile popping up in fear from screen right, the light catching just the edge of her upturned face, mouth open and gasping, in the golden light of a frame otherwise completely dark—a starkly erotic image of a shaken woman pulled into urgent wakefulness.

For Pilate, the news that Abenader delivers of trouble among the natives is a practical problem, one that had better be truly important to justify the late-night intrusion, but for Claudia, it is something much more momentous, even terrifying. Gibson shoots the exchange between Pilate and Abenader from relatively conventional crosscut, over-the-shoulder perspectives, but the initial framing on Pilate’s face leaves room in the left portion of the frame to show, even in shallow focus, Claudia sitting up in bed to listen to the report, the lamplight softly framing her hair amid the blue and orange-tinged shadows and then rising to approach the door when Abenader mentions the high priest’s having arrested some prophet. Arriving at the door, she moves past her consul husband to question the soldier for her own purposes: “A Galilean? Who are you talking about?” Pilate disappears from the frame when Claudia moves in, subtly but decisively superseding his authority, the fact that she is wearing a nightgown with her hair down in front of a soldier apparently is of no concern to her (or her husband) in the midst of this mysterious crisis which has touched her so keenly. With her question, the camera cuts back to Jesus in the temple, getting ready to face the high priest, the cut’s timing lending Claudia’s investment in the arrest of the Galilean greater authority than even Pilate’s. The whole scene is remarkably sensual, intimate, and urgent, at first glance a radical departure from traditional depictions of Pilate as a coward or a hypocrite who washes his hands of Jesus’s killing but does not lift one to actually stop it.

But if Gibson’s portrait of an unhappily pragmatic statesman who is also a sensitive, brooding husband effectively humanizes the stock figure of Pilate, his relationship with his clear-minded, horrified wife nevertheless re-inscribes femaleness as the stuff of the inarticulate lower faculties, maleness as the seat of higher, intellectual forces that finally have to govern the lower ones for causes that they cannot comprehend, much less appreciate. When she appears next, she is dressed and made up to play the part of a consul’s wife, walking by his side in a loose framing down the torch-lit corridors and urging

her husband not to 'condemn this Galilean' because 'he's holy' and his conviction will 'only bring trouble' to Pilate. But the woman's suit goes nowhere, Pilate overruling her with political considerations that apparently have not occurred to her: "Do you know what I consider trouble, Claudia? This stinking outpost, that filthy rabble out there." He exits the frame as she and the camera come to a stop, her face still anguished, possessed of a simple but powerless truth, helpless before the march of events that her husband must see to their end. The image of the pained woman trying hopelessly to persuade her determined, driven man from facing his destiny would fit easily and naturally in *The Robe* (substitute Diana and Marcellus) or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (substitute Jesus and either Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary at key moments). The dynamic is remarkably consistent: the love of women may deepen and romanticize the intellectual-spiritual commitment of the men, but it can ultimately never stand against it, finally only lending it more tragic poignancy. The woman's will is not to be done.

This comparison of Crucifixion films across the decades suggests just how strong a gravitational pull the old male-female, spirit-flesh dualities exert in cinematic treatments of this traditional story.<sup>19</sup> The comparison also underscores the genre's enduring impulse to cater to middle-class America's idealization of the nuclear family, films succeeding or failing at least in part insofar as they allow parents to vigorously indoctrinate their children with images of heroic Christian sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> Love can happen in the time of Calvary, but only by acknowledging that the body finally is made for scourging and sacrifice as it properly and definitively cedes its very existence to an unearthly embrace with God.

## NOTES

1 *The Passion of the Christ*. Blu-Ray. Directed by Mel Gibson. Produced by Icon Distribution, Inc. 2004. The Blu-Ray "Ultimate Edition" of the film includes, among its special features, a documentary segment entitled "Guerilla Marketing", which covers various aspects of the film's marketing campaign.

2 James Y. Trammell, "Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See *The Passion of the Christ*?: Marketing Movies to Evangelicals," *Journal of Media and Religion* 9 (2010): 19. Trammell identifies the film's ability to serve as a proselytizing device as one of four "dominant themes" in its marketing campaign, the other three being accuracy, authenticity, and justification for its R-rating (23).

3 John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 13. Belton describes the increasing use of classical story material as an important component of the film industry's increasing desire to cater to middle-class sensibilities.

4 The promotional materials for the DVD *Charlton Heston Reads the Bible* quote Heston on the importance of *The Ten Commandments* to his career and life: "Ever since playing Moses in *The Ten Commandments* I've felt a deep, personal connection with the Bible which remains as vivid and vital today as when it was told around campfires centuries before there was any written language." From Willie Osterwell's review of *Charlton Heston Reads the*

Bible,” <http://www.justpressplay.net/movies/dvdblu-ray-reviews/7596-charlton-heston-presents-the-bible.html#ixzz1L7GE3pby>. (Accessed May 1, 2011.)

5 See Belton, 321-32.

6 See Belton, 336-8.

7 See Belton, 324.

8 Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, no. 1 (June, 1990): 39. Vaughn points out that the film industry made traditional arbiters of morality anxious because it spoke to “mass audiences directly . . . [and] all too easily bypassed traditional agencies of socialization—the church, the school, the family” 39.

9 Belton notes both the general pandering of the mid-century Biblical epic to Cold War patriotism and, ironically, the ability of *The Robe* to take a stance against McCarthy and the Red Scare. In either understanding, the genre addresses contemporary political fears and pressures in mid-century America. (See Belton, p. 313.)

10 For a useful breakdown of the remarkably potent and widespread protests and the decisions by various theater chains either not to screen the film at all or to limit it to select urban markets, see Thomas R. Lindlof, *Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), especially the eighth chapter, “The Big Wind-Up” pp. 219-49.

11 For a useful account of the resistance the film sparked, see Lindlof.

12 Dan Quayle, “Address to the Commonwealth Club,” May 19, 1992, [http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches\\_StandingFirm\\_CCC\\_3.html](http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches_StandingFirm_CCC_3.html). (Accessed May 1, 2011.)

13 The list of conservative Christian leaders who fomented protest included many who had also protested abortion, feminism, and homosexuality, such as James Dobson of Focus on the Family, Jerry Falwell, and Donald Wildmon. (See Lindlof, pp. 220-1.)

14 The film earned the Restricted rating “primarily for scenes of frontal nudity, simulated sex, and graphic violence” Lindlof 238.

15 Summarizing the problem that *The Last Temptation* posed to evangelicals, Trammell invokes telling gender stereotypes, the film characterizing Jesus “less as a powerful, confident savior and more as a weak, reluctant messiah” p24. Scorsese’s Jesus, in short, is not sufficiently macho for conservative American Christians—a weakness that Gibson’s film would work vigorously to correct.

16 As Kazantzakis does in the novel, the film breaks with the long convention of referring to Mary Magdalene either by her full name or as ‘the Magdalene’ by shortening it to just ‘Magdalene’. (See, for example, Kazantzakis, pp. 88ff.)

17 See Tammie Kennedy's "(Re)Presenting Mary Magdalene: A Feminist Reading of The Last Temptation of Christ," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. 9 (Spring, 2005), paragraph 16.

18 Kennedy, paragraphs 8-12.

19 Even Monty Python's delightfully irreverent *Life of Brian* includes a dalliance for the reluctant Brian with a brazen ideologue named Judith for which the pseudo-Messiah receives a nasty scolding from his equally pseudo-virgin mother.

20 One of the more telling and disturbing aspects of the marketing campaign for *The Passion*, in fact, was the pamphlets prepared by Icon Pictures to coach parents in the reasons they could and should take their young children to watch Jesus being whipped and beaten to a bloody pulp.