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At Rutgers University, eclectic panel looks dispassionately at 'The Passion'

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Among right-wing Christian evangelicals, there is a perception that Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* is not a Catholic film at all, but rather a film for and about them, said journalist Jeff Sharlet.

"They claim *The Passion* as their own," said Sharlet, editor of the webzine *The Revealer: A Daily Review of Religion and the Press*. "I'm not sure they particularly watch it much. They don't like it as entertainment."

However, Sharlet said, many evangelicals place the DVD jewel case of *The Passion* in a place of honor in their homes — not far from the swords that submissive evangelical wives give to their husbands as a symbol of their patriarchy and power.

"You put the DVD in your study, just as you put the sword in your den," he said. "It sort of radiates an example. You don't have to watch the movie. You don't have to swing the sword. You just have it there. So *The Passion* really has more of a role in the evangelical community as an object — something you put in your home to say: 'This is a sign of our coming of age politically.'"

Sharlet offered his observations during a March 31 panel discussion, *The Passions Surrounding The Passion: A Look Back at a Controversial Film*, an evening sponsored by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

Panelists, in addition to Sharlet, were Stuart Klawans, film critic for *The Nation*, and Elizabeth Castelli, associate professor of religion at Barnard College in New York. Jeffrey Shandler, assistant professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers and acting director of the Bildner Center, moderated the program, which served as the center's annual Raoul Wallenberg Lecture, funded by the Leon and Toby Cooperman Fund.

The recent re-release of *The Passion* provides a perfect opportunity to take a second look at the social and political impact of the film, Shandler said in an interview before the program.

"The discussion the film provoked was so extensive and provocative and wide-ranging and was of such great interest to the Jewish community, we felt it would be valuable to have a look back at this discussion, now that people have had a chance to assess it," Shandler said.

“We’re interested not so much in the film, but in the way people have responded to the film,” he said. “This is a chance to do that kind of cultural assessing.”

The Passion raises issues of morality, identity, authority, and belief, Shandler told the audience of close to 200. “Gibson’s film raises a whole array of issues as a film and as a religious experience — and, for many Jews and Muslims, as a religiously challenging experience,” he said. “Our task is to examine the issues independent of the passions they arouse in us.”

Klawans took up that task by noting that American culture often confuses the popular with the good.

“Forty years ago, John Lennon let slip the comment that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus,” said Klawans, author of *Film Follies: The Cinema Out of Order*. “He was not boasting when he said this. He was speaking with a combination of distress and disgust. Nevertheless, his comments were taken up as if he had been boasting.”

In a similar way, *The Passion* elicits the notion that the film with the best box office is the best film, he said — that if it’s popular, it’s of high quality.

“This has been put forth by some of the supporters of *The Passion*,” Klawans said. “[Film critic] Michael Medved and other people in his camp rejoiced that *The Passion of the Christ* made a lot of money at the box office, that it was one of the box-office leaders of all times.”

However, Klawans said, it is interesting to note — in a spirit of truth rather than of irreverence — just where *The Passion* stands among America’s all-time box-office champs.

Currently, he said, the film ranks ninth, with earnings of \$370 million — behind *Titanic*, which raked in \$600 million in the United States and \$1.83 billion worldwide; behind *Shrek II* — “a film about an ogre and a talking donkey” — at \$436 million; behind *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, which earned \$377 million; and behind *Spiderman II*, which made \$373 million. He added that *The Passion* ranks just above *Finding Nemo*, which he described as “a film about a rather more caring father-son relationship.”

As for video rentals of *The Passion*, the film pulled in \$50 million in rentals during a two-month period, according to Klawans. “But to put it in context, *Kill Bill, Volume 2* took in \$52 million,” he said.

“As you can see, *The Passion of the Christ* did make a hit, but not so great a hit,” he said. “So where does all this leave us? Yes, we should look at *The Passion of the Christ* and its political fallout with distress, but also, in the spirit of John Lennon, with disgust.”

But how is it, Castelli asked, that the film has had such a strong impact? She said she regarded *The Passion* in relation to the remarkably popular book by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, which cracks open the ancient Christian story to portray Jesus as a husband and a father.

“One of the things about both of these texts is that they are adapting early Christian stories into genres, idioms, and tropes of contemporary popular culture,” said Castelli, author of *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture-Making*.

It is interesting, Castelli added, to view *The Passion* in the context of the reassertion of Christian masculinity that is currently sweeping through conservative Christianity. For example, she said, the film dwells on the tortured body of Jesus as a source of power, and dramatizes the resurrection of Jesus to the militaristic beat of a drum.

“Although *The Da Vinci Code* is lifting up a very different portrait over the warrior son of God, the two stories end up as mirror images of each other,” she said. “At this moment in American history, it’s interesting to think about why there’s such a draw to these popularizations of ancient stories.

“What’s drawing this attention to ancient Christian stories in a very postmodern age? I’m not sure I have all the answers,” she said, “but I think it’s really something to explore.”

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