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Making Sense of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*:

A Qualitative Study of the Christian Audience

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After much anticipation, American moviegoers flocked to theaters across the nation even before its official opening on February 25, 2004, to see for themselves what had been causing the intensely heated controversy surrounding the independent film produced by one of Hollywood's big names, Mel Gibson. Though thousands had had the opportunity to preview it in special screenings as part of the film's marketing strategy to build a strong grassroots movement, it was not until Ash Wednesday that theater doors were opened to the general public for the long-awaited film, *The Passion of the Christ*, graphically depicting the final 12 hours in the human life of Jesus Christ.

The film's success was immediate as it garnered a number one ranking and yielded more than \$26 million on its Wednesday opening in 3,006 theaters across the nation. It maintained the top slot for the first 23 days and remained near the top through the end of April 2004. In the first 47 days—from its opening through Easter Sunday—*The Passion of the Christ* corralled tens of millions of viewers and \$353,006,351, quickly recouping the meager \$30 million that Gibson shelled out for the film's production budget and the estimated \$20 million that went into marketing the movie (Box Office Mojo, 2004).

The Passion Phenomenon

While the box office numbers certainly indicated business success in terms of the bottom line, the film was a force that may best be described as a cultural phenomenon characterized by its passionate reception from a diverse audience. Proponents and opponents of the film have been featured regularly in every sector of the news media for nearly a year. The news reports show how the film polarized most of its viewers into categories of those who either strongly supported

Gibson's cinematic work or vehemently opposed it. An array of merchandise, including a pictorial coffee table book, the film's soundtrack, and church promotional materials, quickly made their debut in retail outlets. Official and unofficial sites sprung up on the World Wide Web to enable audiences to engage with one another over the movie. The more vocal Christian community, including Catholics and Protestants, spoke loudly in a unified voice of support for the R-rated film. Many Christians endorsed its use for evangelistic and personal spiritual growth purposes.

In an effort to document the supernatural effects of the movie, executive producer Jody Eldred created a one-hour documentary titled *Changed Lives: Miracles of the Passion*:

In their own words, the people interviewed for the special give accounts of relationships restored, diseases healed, the dead resurrected, atheists coming to faith, and even a confession to murder. It is truly unprecedented the way God has used 'The Passion' to bring healing, reconciliation, and peace to people across the nation and around the globe (Jody Eldred Productions, 2004).

The program aired repeatedly during over the weekend of Easter on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). Subsequently, the PAX Television Network aired the program and it has been made available on VHS and DVD.

As a Christian and as a student of communication, the phenomenon surrounding this film intrigued me. From the time I first heard about Mel Gibson's work, I knew that I wanted to see it but I never expected such a public reaction to the film. Since the film opened nationwide and has since opened in international markets, my curiosities have resulted in many questions: Why have people flocked to see it? What was the movie-going experience like? How did this movie differ from other films, including others which depicted Christian events as reported by the Bible?

How have people responded to it? What kind of an impact has the movie had on viewers? Who has not seen the film and why? This qualitative research study was designed to explore the phenomenon associated with *The Passion of the Christ* and, more specifically, how audiences are making sense of what they see during the 126-minute motion picture.

Literature Review

This study of how audiences have come to understand *The Passion of the Christ* is rooted in the interactional tradition and, more specifically, the social constructionist movement. To understand the epistemological underpinnings of this article, it will be helpful to review symbolic interactionism and social construction of reality before moving on to the historical relationship between Christianity and mass media.

Symbolic Interactionism and Social Constructionism

Littlejohn (2002) explained that to those who come from an interactional tradition, cognitive explanations are secondary to social ones in explaining the creation of meaning that comes through communication. “Interaction establishes, maintains, and changes certain conventions—roles, norms, rules, and meanings—within a social group or culture, and these conventions in turn define the reality of the culture itself” (p. 144). This is the foundation of Symbolic Interactionism, a movement first introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1937, which comes from the discipline of sociology. Lal (1995) summarized the foundations for Social Interactionism. Several premises, as summarized by Littlejohn (2002) are worth noting here:

- People make decisions and act in accordance with their subjective understandings of the situations in which they find themselves.
- People understand their experiences through the meanings found in the symbols of their primary groups, and language is an essential part of social life.

- People's actions are based on their interpretations, in which the relevant objects and actions in the situation are taken into account and defined (p. 146).

The works of Berger and Luckmann (1966), Schutz (1967), and others were appropriately labeled social constructionism by Gergen (1985), building upon the ideas of symbolic interactionism. Essentially, social constructionism explains how reality is constructed by emphasizing the ways in which a social phenomenon is created, institutionalized and made into tradition by humans. The emphasis is on the actor(s) and action(s) more so than on analyzing cause and effects. The social construction of reality is a dynamic process whereby reality is re-produced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge.

The ontological and epistemological assumptions of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism are foundational for Dervin's Sense-Making methodology which was employed for this study and which was used to analyze the present study's findings. Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003) will be discussed further in this paper as part of the section on methodology.

Christianity and Mass Media

Before moving on, it is appropriate to take a brief look at the historical relationship between Christianity and the mass media, including the earliest portrayals of Jesus Christ in film as well as the most controversial.

Depictions of religion in mass media, and more specifically in film, date back to the turn of the 20th Century. Realizing the popularity of biblical accounts among cinema's audiences, filmmakers began to use moving pictures to tell the stories of Cain and Abel, Samson and Delilah, Solomon, the prodigal son, and Saul and David. However, the first representations of biblical stories on film actually focused on Jesus Christ and began even earlier with recordings of

staged Passion Plays in Europe (Butler, 1969). Portrayals of Christ in film were very limited until 1927 when Cecil B. DeMille produced *The King of Kings*, the most expensive and most talked-about religious film up to that point. Butler (1969) describes the first representation of Christ, played by H. B. Warner:

A young blind girl is among a crowd outside a fisherman's hut listening to a boy's story of a man inside who has cured his lameness. The girl is taken into the hut. All goes dark as we are placed behind her sightless eyes. Gradually, from all corners of the screen, rays of light begin to radiate, growing even brighter and more concentrated until—at first in a haze, then clearly—she sees the gentle face of her Healer smiling down at her.

Butler goes on to express the commanding influence of this early film: “In forty years the scene has lost none of its power, and it is easy to believe the American minister who told Warner some time later: ‘I saw you in *The King of Kings* when I was a child and now, every time I speak of Jesus, it is your face I see’.” (p. 40). Subsequent films have given audiences myriad representations of the person of Jesus Christ, the individual on which the world's largest religion is built.

Other research (Anker, 2000; “The Leading Man,” 2004) has recounted some of the mass-mediated depictions of Jesus Christ. Among those most frequently cited are a 1961 version of *King of Kings*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in 1965, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* in 1966, *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1973, *Godspell* in 1973, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. Obviously missing from the recent list is the 2003 production of *The Gospel of John*, directed Philip Saville which opened in limited theatres just three months before Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and was released on VHS and DVD simultaneously.

There is an evident relationship between religion and mass media—two of the most basic institutions of society. Stout and Buddenbaum (1996) have provided an audience-centered review of the affective relationship between Christianity and mass media. Blending sociological and mass communication perspectives, their work has explored “how mass media help create the information environments in which a religious worldview is acquired” and “how religiosity contributes to the interpretive processes” (p. 9). The review of literature which begins their edited volume produced no surprising findings, but generally concluded that mass media has the potential to affect religion and religion may equally influence the mass media by affecting audiences’ use of it. They explain that the current literature includes “scattered studies, simple and simplistic measures, ambiguous and apparently contradictory findings, incomplete explanations, and a general lack of thoughtful and coherent explanations” (p. 30).

The most noteworthy conclusion articulated by Stout and Buddenbaum (1996) was their pointing to the need for additional study of the relationship between mass media and religion:

Theories of public opinion formation, including the agenda-setting tradition from mass communication, rational choice, cognitive processing, group dynamics, schema formation, social learning, socialization, developmental theories, and many more, could profitably be used to explore between-group and within-group differences (p. 30).

The Last Temptation of Christ

To advance Stout and Buddenbaum’s call for more audience-centered studies, Lindlof (1996) examined the controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Lindlof described the uproar that surrounded the film as a manifestation of an emerging “culture war” in the U.S. After a content analysis of 164 letters published following a solicitation for letters to the editor by a daily newspaper in Kentucky, he posited that writers’ interpretations

of the film was significantly influenced by the communities with which they affiliated. He concluded that *The Last Temptation of Christ*'s controversy resulted because the film had "upset some of the most fundamental social rules there are: the unwritten ones that regulate the image of a god and mark one group's truth from the brush of another's imagination" (p. 165). In other words, opponents of the film were disturbed by the depiction of Christ's humanity that contradicted their deeply held convictions as determined by their reading of the Bible and their religious community. "To be faced with a text that goes against their codes is to dislocate the community and arouse its passion," Lindlof explained (p. 165). On the contrary, he suggested that the film's producers had simply operated under a completely different set of codes.

Amidst the online discussions of *The Passion of the Christ*, one can find countless comparison to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The following message appeared on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) in response to an earlier post proclaiming the superiority of Scorsese's film to the more recent work of Mel Gibson. The message gives readers insight into this viewer's expectations of the films and his interpretation of *The Passion* as more realistic.

The two movies have completely different motives and should not be compared in such a manner. While Scorsese was attempting to humanize the Christ (successfully), Gibson was moving to bring a catharsis out of the actual suffering He endured. I do appreciate *The Passion* more because the bloodshed and torment is right on the mark, and as sensational as the film seems, it actually has a convicting sprinkle of realism to bring the crucifixion to life. Accuracy nothing [sic]; what I desire is reality (Shayfclay, 2004).

Interpretive Community

The Christian community's vehement opposition to the 1988 film is a direct contrast to their warm, embracing reception of *The Passion*. To understand this phenomenon it is necessary

to further examine interpretive community, what Lindlof (1996) cited as the reason for the polarity of audience responses to *The Last Temptation*. In 2002 Lindlof further unpacked the concept of interpretive community, defining it as a social-semiotic approach to studying media audiences that emerged throughout the 1980s and 1990s. He posited that it is an ideal way to study the relationship between media and religion. He outlined five propositions that serve as the basis for interpretive community (Lindlof, 2002, pp. 64-65):

- Interpretive community is comprised of sets of discursive strategies that find their expression in tactical “readings” (or rewritings of text) by socially situated individuals or groups. Membership in the community means that a person performs media usage in ways that are recognizable and valued by others.
- Although media discourses are structured in ways that favor the activation of certain audience discourses, the individual text always has a polysemic potential. The text can produce meanings in vivo only in relation to the audience’s knowledge and valuation of other texts and social institutions.
- Communities vary in terms of how intentional and self-conscious they are. Some interpretive communities are public, self-consciously named (and promoted), and more or less stable; whereas others are more elusive, less intentional, and less available to public inspection.
- Interpretive communities are most easily identified as an audience for a genre. Interpretive communities can also form as outgrowths of preexisting groupings, such as a religious community in which case content serves as a resource for identity grounded in spiritual worldview or ethos. The religious community may even develop interpretive strategies for avoiding or restricting media use.

- Interpretive communities are multiple, overlapping, and potentially contradictory. The sort of unity seen in face-to-face community is often absent in the media-based communities.

Lindlof (1996) suggested that “no effect of a film can last for long, because its meaning mutates rapidly as the object taken up in discourse” (p. 165). As we will see the interpretive community plays a critical role in the sense-making of *The Passion of the Christ*.

Research Questions

The phenomenon surrounding *The Passion*, described at the beginning of this paper, demands study by communication researchers with interests in media effects as well as those interested in the processes by which audience members come to an understanding of the film. The present study takes an audience-centered approach to documenting the mass media’s power as exemplified by this film. Recognizing that understanding and meaning are socially constructed, this study examines how some Christian viewers of the film have been engaged on a private and public level. The following research questions have guided this qualitative inquiry:

RQ1 Why are people seeing the film?

RQ2 What was the viewing experience like?

RQ3 How are viewers making sense of *The Passion of the Christ*?

Methodological Approaches

Because of the nature of these research questions and the epistemological assumptions conveyed earlier in this paper, it was natural to approach this study from a qualitative perspective. As scholars from various disciplines (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) have acknowledged, there are common advantages and disadvantages to such research inquiry.

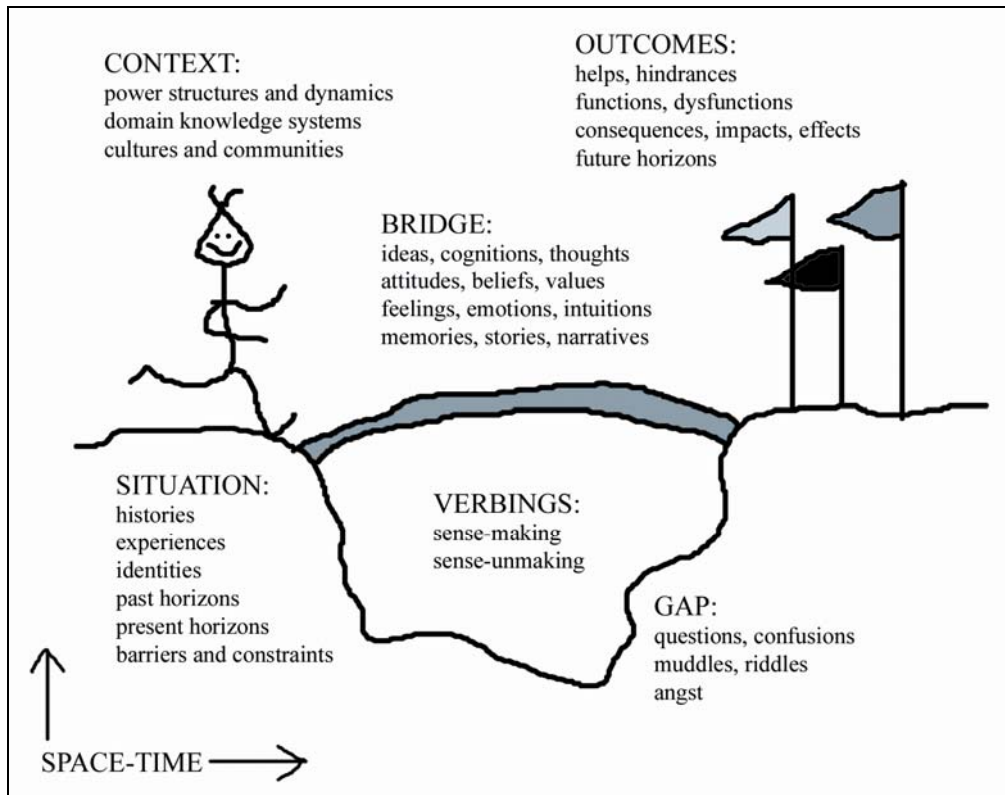
Appropriate to this endeavor, Lindlof (1991) described the use of qualitative inquiry in the study of media audiences and pointed to its increasing acceptance. He summarized five approaches (i.e., social phenomenological, communication rules, cultural studies, reception study, and feminist research) to qualitative inquiry that has been refined over the past decade. Coinciding with social interactionism and constructionism is social phenomenology which suggests language is the means by which humans articulate their own interpretations of self and the world in which they exist. “For social-phenomenological inquiry, then, the main task and accomplishment of all social life is making meaning. The main task of inquiry is to interpret this semiotic activity by observing it at close range and in great detail” (Lindlof, 1991, p. 26). Gubrium and Holstein (2000) clarified this approach by suggesting that “interpretive practice engages both the hows and the whats of social reality; it is centered both in how people methodically construct their experiences and their worlds and in the configurations of meaning and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constituting activity” (p. 488).

Sense-Making

Since 1972 Brenda Dervin and others have focused on the development of the concept known since 1983 as Sense-Making. Foreman-Wernet (2003) explained how the methodology critiques the transmission model of communication that has been used predominantly in mass media studies by insisting that communication be viewed as a dynamic process of dialogue instead of the mere sending and receiving of messages. More than 30 years of refinement to Sense-Making culminated in the publication of the *Sense-Making Methodology Reader: Selected Writings of Brenda Dervin* (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003) which traces development of the methodology that has been utilized for the present study.

Dervin (2003a) summarized Sense-Making Methodology using an illustration similar to that which is presented in Figure 1. She describes how the human moves cognitively through time-space using whatever senses he or she has already constructed based on personal as well as vicarious experiences. Given that life is inherently discontinuous, sense frequently runs out. A gap is identified. The human must build a bridge across the gap. In doing so, the human will answer questions, create ideas, and/or obtain resources. The situation that leads to the gap, the gap itself, the bridge, and even what the human does after crossing the bridge, are all best understood as constructions (p. 224).

Figure 1 – Model of Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology¹



¹ From Dervin, B. & Foreman-Wernet, L. (with E. Lauterbach). (Eds.). (2003). *Sense-making methodology reader: Selected writings of Brenda Dervin*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.

In implementing the core method of Sense-Making, the Time-Line Interview, the most important role of the researcher is that of listener and analyst. The objective of the researcher is to discover the situation in which the respondent found him- or herself by asking them to identify steps along the continuum of events. Though the steps may not be chronological, each provides necessary contextual information for the identification of gaps that were faced by the respondent and the process of bridging the gaps through information seeking and communication.

Dervin (2003b) added to the model with an illustrated Sense-Making Triangle to explain how an individual potentially makes sense as he or she moves through an experience. The triangle represents the interdependent relationship of the situation, the gap, and the outcomes (or uses as evaluated as helps or hurts). “The essence of that sense-making moment is assumed to be addressed by focusing on how the actor defined and dealt with the situation, the gap, the bridge, and the continuation of the journey after crossing the bridge.” (Dervin, 2003b, p. 278)

The use of Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology to explore how audiences make sense of their experiences with mass media is limited, but it possesses great methodological and theoretical potential. Smith (2000) employed the developing methodology as articulated in 1983 to study how viewers made sense of MTV’s “The Real World.” An extensive search of the literature discovered that this is the only study comparable to what has been attempted here.

Methodology

To begin the process of answering my research questions, I utilized participant-observation and in-depth interviews to gather data that would inform my analysis and conclusions for this study. The actual data collection began weeks before the film’s opening as I gathered and read hundreds of articles about the movie and the controversy surrounding it. Additionally, each mention on television caught my attention as I listened to what others were

saying about the film. The movie's opening in theaters only intensified the amount of information with which I was bombarded. No longer was I relying on mediated reports from radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, I was hearing the personal stories from colleagues and friends who had seen *The Passion of the Christ*. It was on Ash Wednesday, the movie's opening day when I decided to officially study the sense-making phenomenon surrounding the film and began formally collecting data and recording my own experience with the movie.

Our Experience

While I continued to consume massive amounts of information about the movie and its reported effects on audiences, I knew that my research had to begin with my own viewing of the film. And I knew that my experience at the movie theater would have an influence on my research. I retell my own viewing experience as part of the self-reflexivity necessary for a qualitative study such as this.

I had made plans to see the film about two weeks after its opening. My wife, Robyn, and I had planned to go to a local theater with one of our best friends, Nita. As our scheduled viewing date got closer, Nita began to have second thoughts about her desire to see the film. Though she originally had expressed great interest in seeing it, in the end she opted not to join us, concluding that she did "not want Mel Gibson to redefine how [she saw] the most important event in Christian history, especially as [she] celebrate[d] the Holy time leading up to Easter." Robyn and I adjusted our plans slightly because we still wanted to see for ourselves what was causing such commotion among Christian and non-Christian communities.

As we drove to the theater, silence gradually overtook our car. It was in those quiet moments that I had second thoughts about seeing the film. My hesitation did not stem from

disinterest in the subject or even its graphic violence that I had heard about. Instead, I wondered if I had prepared sufficiently for the experience that awaited me. Naturally, I am a very analytically critical viewer of films and I knew that this movie had the potential to incite strong opinions and emotions for me. Since I was a child, I have regularly read and reflected upon the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And just days before I was to see the film, I re-read the Gospel accounts of the 12 hours leading up to Christ's crucifixion. I knew the story, but I did not know what to expect from Mel Gibson.

We arrived at the movie theater about two hours early to insure that we would be able to purchase tickets for the 7 o'clock show. *The Passion of the Christ* was showing on four screens of the cinema multiplex with showtimes beginning every half hour from noon until 10 p.m. that day. Of the 21 shows on that cool Sunday in early March, only a handful had tickets available. So we were able to purchase two tickets for the 7 o'clock show and we had plenty of time to spare.

The extra time at the cinema proved to be a valuable opportunity to observe the movie-going culture for this particular film. Standing discreetly to the side of the lobby, I positioned myself so that I had a good view of the lobby as well as the hallway leading to the various screening rooms. With my reporter's notebook in hand, I jotted cryptic words and phrases to help me recall the images of the masses who had congregated to enter earlier shows as well as those who were exiting the theater from having seen the movie already. There was a stark contrast between those waiting to see the film and those who had already seen it. The lobby was full of people who had been corralled by theater employees into rows by the classical posts and velour-covered ropes. I was glad Robyn and I made it past the attendants so that we did not have to stand with the growing masses.

Dulled, yet powerful, music roared from the screening rooms where the film was still playing and could be heard underneath the gleeful chatter of the waiting crowd. Those in the lobby seemed to be full of energy, anxious to see what their \$8.50 tickets had gotten them. However, those who were re-emerging from the darkened theater having seen the film displayed very different appearances. Basically they fell into one of two categories. Either they were visibly shaken and emotional or they were emotionless. For a moment I felt like I was observing the conclusion of a youth evangelism conference or Bible camp for teens. Streams of youthful viewers poured out the screening room doors. Most were unable to hold back the tears. The supposedly stronger ones comforted the others who had been disturbed by their experience. One of the adults who had accompanied a church youth group blurted, “Guys, it’s even hard to watch the second time around.” Those who were not visibly emotional appeared to have glazed-over eyes. Unlike other films where audiences were exiting discussing what they had just seen, there was silence among those who had just seen *The Passion*.

At last it was our time to enter a screening room in preparation for the 7 o’clock showing. Because of our location outside the crowd control obstacles, Robyn and I were among the first into the theater. Having found our ideal seats toward the back and in the center, we sat quietly waiting for the movie to begin. As I looked around at the gradually filling room, I noticed that nearly everyone had come to see the film with someone else. Most were in small groups that ranged from 3 to 12 people. I noted that the 297-seat theater was about three-quarters filled just before the lights dimmed and the previews began. From all external indicators, this movie was going to be no different than any other. But I was wrong and I discovered that my experience was not unlike others’.

Listening to Others

Having experienced the film myself, I was prepared to embark upon in-depth interviews to explore how others had seen the film and made sense of it. Over a period of five weeks, I employed Dervin's Sense-Making methodology by conducting 15 in-depth interviews with professing Christians, aged 12-49, who had also seen the film at least once. The sample consisted of a purposive group of movie-goers who were representative of the larger viewing audience. Respondents were recruited through pre-existing acquaintances and by utilizing the snowball method. The duration of interviews ranged from 30 minutes to just over 2 hours.

The lengthier interviews resulted as I encountered individuals with whom I had more in common in terms of age and experiences. For example, the shortest interview which last about 30 minutes was conducted with a 12-year-old student. The longest interview was conducted with a 34-year-old white male who worked as a web developer. For each interview I applied the timeline approach as described by Dervin (2003b) to ascertain the gaps that were encountered prior to, during, and following the respondents' viewing of *The Passion of the Christ*. I probed and listened closely to determine how each had made sense of the gaps they encountered and how they had constructed a bridge across the gaps.

The fifteen interviews yielded myriad sense-making experiences. For this paper, I will summarize the findings of all of the interviews and provide more detailed descriptions of some of the richest conversations. At the request of some respondents, names have been simplified and, in some cases, slightly altered to disguise the identities of interviewees in exchange for greater candidness during the interviews. No other adaptations were made in the writing of this paper.

Findings: Circling the Experience

Dervin (2003b) labels the technique illustrated by the Sense-Making Triangle as “circling the experience.” As I began the interviews, it was apparent that each respondent had experienced *The Passion of the Christ* unlike any other film they had seen previously. For each respondent, there were identifiable situations, gaps, and outcomes.

Situations

Given that all respondents labeled themselves as Christians, one might assume that their situations would be very similar. However, my in-depth interviews proved otherwise. Though each had seen the film, their motivations for seeing it as well as their movie-going experiences were quite different. All recalled having first heard about the movie first from the controversy around accusations of anti-Semitism that were reported by the news media months before the movie opened.

Many viewers were attracted first by the movie’s faith-based subject. Aynette, a 28-year-old elementary school teacher, said she first wanted to see *The Passion of the Christ* because it was the first major film about Jesus that had been produced by a Hollywood insider. She assumed that Gibson’s involvement with the film would result in a higher caliber production than others which had attempted to depict biblical stories.

Raymond, a 41-year-old Southern Baptist pastor, initially had reservations when he first heard about the film. He said, “one of my first impressions ... was that this might be an attempt by a big Hollywood star to use religion for a profit motive.” His fears that the film would be another “distorted presentation of Christianity” were alleviated as he watched Mel Gibson discuss his motives and his own financial investment into the film:

I felt that he did have another purpose that was higher, that he did have strong religious convictions, coming from the conservative Catholic branch that he was in. And I felt like there was more sincerity or pure motive over what others had displayed in other movies. My opinion began to change somewhat after I heard several interviews. There was another motive, I felt, to communicate the Christian message through the mass medium of cinema with all of the visual effects and in a very dramatic way. He was going to do that to capture people's attention and their thoughts about the passion of Christ (personal communication, April 6, 2004).

Jean, a 29-year-old librarian, acknowledged that she had been reading about the movie on the Internet for months and knew that she wanted to see it. Though originally she had decided to wait for the crowds to dissipate before seeing it, she actually saw it during the opening weekend with a group of friends from church. "I wouldn't have seen it so soon had it not been for my friends from church insisting that I go with them," she added (personal communication, April 17, 2004).

Similarly, Mike, a 34-year-old web programmer and self-described "media worshipper," had been following the media coverage of the film, particularly alternative and more liberal views. However, as opening day came, he made the decision not to see it because of its extreme popularity among the conservative Christian market. "I'm just not that kind of Christian who jumps on the bandwagon for an emotional high with everybody else." However, he finally gave in to the "peer pressure" and went to see it with two friends on Easter Sunday. "I kind of felt like I was being accused of not being a Christian for not seeing it so early," Mike remembered. "I saw it on Easter just out of respect, I guess" (personal communication, April 19, 2004).

While some were simply curious about the hype surrounding the film and others more interested in the movie's content, each of the individuals interviewed for this study expressed one of three motivations for their seeing of the film: (1) personal spiritual development, (2) evangelistic opportunity, or (3) desire to be a part of the masses who were talking about it.

Though some viewer's expectations were met, others' experiences turned out quite differently.

For example, Andrew, a 24-year-old blue collar worker, said that he went to see the film expecting it to be a good topic of conversation at work and with people in his church's singles group. "It went from an intellectual exercise to a personal and emotional experience," he said, "when Mary was watching Jesus carry the cross and there was a flashback to the time when Jesus was a child and had fallen. She ran to him. That was incredible. I'm not a parent and I'm not going to be one anytime soon, but I hope to understand what that felt like. It was just powerful." Andrew went on to say that his initial desire to talk about the movie went away right after I saw it. "I couldn't really talk about it," he explained (personal communication, March 13, 2004). The experience became very personal on a deep, spiritual level—something Andrew was not expecting and he was unprepared to discuss it (even reluctant to discuss it in detail during this interview).

The first time Bradley, a 16-year-old high school student, saw the movie with a friend, he knew that Gibson had communicated one point clearly: "God died for everyone." He noticed how it was personally affecting those sitting in the theater around him. Immediately, he knew that he wanted to bring his girlfriend to see the film since she had been asking many questions about Christianity. "Something in me just wanted to be there when she saw it," he added. So, within a week Bradley and his girlfriend—accompanied by his mother, brother, and sister—were sitting in the movie theater watching *The Passion*. Though it was Bradley's second time to see

the film, it was the first time for those who were with him. He noticed all of the potential distractions in the theater. “The Devil was in there,” he explained. “A lady spilled her drink, everybody was distracted from the movie, people were talking, cell phones were ringing.” Bradley saw the viewing experience for its evangelistic potential.

Bradley was not alone. Raymond, the Southern Baptist pastor, explained that local ministers who meet regularly for fellowship began discussing early on how their churches could take advantage of the film. “We had more than one meeting to determine best how we could use this movie in our community. Living here in the Bible belt, it seemed that there was a strong response in the community—not just church members but also from those who were out of the church as well. We asked ourselves how we could use this for the glory of God,” Raymond recalled. As the movie’s opening day got nearer, an anonymous donor provided funding for the purchase of 1,000 tickets and copies of John Piper’s book, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*, to be used for evangelistic purposes. “We felt like the Lord had definitely moved this person’s heart to do such a thing,” Raymond added.

Gaps

Everyone I interviewed said that *The Passion of the Christ* was unlike any other movie they had seen. Using Dervin’s definition of a “gap”—questions, confusions, muddles, riddles, or angst—one can observe that nearly all viewers of this film encountered one. Through analysis of my interviews, it became apparent that the number, breadth, and depth of the gaps varied from viewer to viewer. Amidst the 15 interviews conducted for this study, Catherine, a 49-year-old self-employed mother of three, was the only Catholic that I spoke with. She described her experience:

It's just something you can't get over. With a lot of movies you can watch them and they are going to be on your mind for two or three days, a week or two weeks at the most. But this one goes deeper than that. It touches you to the point that you've got to find answers to the questions that you have. You get filled by watching it and you've got to get the answers to the questions that you have. It just makes you ... maybe that's the goal of it, to make you open your Bible again and make you find answers to things that you've been looking for because of the movie. . . . I think that it will always—in the back of your mind—be there. I don't mean that it's going to haunt you, but it's kind of like that. It's not meant for you to forget about it.

Catherine seemed to sum up the perceived power of the movie that others also expressed.

Similarly, Raymond suggested that the most powerful effects of the film that he has seen among his congregation has been the increase of inward reflection. These questions and inward reflection are at the core of Sense-Making's gaps.

As I asked respondents to reflect upon and articulate the questions that they asked during the film, each one struggled for what they thought might be the right answer. However, by allowing them to talk through their experience as directed by the Time-Line interview technique, gaps begin to surface. Analysis of interviews revealed that viewers' questions or experiences of angst fell into one of three categories.

First and not surprisingly, the film's graphic violence was a source of much anxiety. Each respondent was quick to comment on the brutality of Gibson's portrayal of Christ's scourging. Even Mike, who admitted that *Kill Bill* is one of his favorite movies, said, "I feel that he [Mel Gibson] did focus a bit too perversely on the violence." He went on to comment on the interesting an phenomenon in the Christian culture brought about by *The Passion of the Christ*:

I found it very interesting ... that we got millions and millions of Christians to go see an R-rated movie first of all, a movie with high violence in it, and a movie that had subtitles. How many people do you think who saw this movie would have done any of those things before this movie came out. That was just shocking to me (personal communication, April 19, 2004).

Mike went on to say that he had expected to be unfazed by the violence thinking that his own media viewing habits would have desensitized him to the brutality.

Ellen, a 37-year-old former journalist from China and current doctoral student in the U.S., said that the movie raised one general question for her: "Why did Jesus need to be abused that way to save people's lives? Why was it so bloody? Why was that so crucial?" She explained that the graphic images had such an impact. "That night after I watched the movie and when I was taking a shower, I could not wash myself," she said. "All I could think about was the scene of Jesus, naked and bloody. It made me so sad. All the night I had that picture in my mind." In seeking the answer to her dominating questions, she visited a couple of divinity students who also attend the same university. "I ask them why Jesus needed to use blood to save people. Why blood? How can it wash away sins? Why blood and not water? And finally, we concluded that God says there is life in blood." She bridged the gap she was facing through her conversation with divinity students. Together they resolved that to understand the answer to her question required reflection upon humankind's first sin in the Garden of Eden as recounted in Scripture. Believing that life is possible because of blood which carries oxygen to all organs of the body, Ellen explained that the consequences for human sin is death and that in order to save the world from their sins, Jesus Christ had to give up his life. As a result, Ellen revolved, Jesus Christ's

blood was necessary for the accomplishment of the sacrificial act that took place on the cross and that was at the heart of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

The graphic violence caused Catherine to have nightmares the first three nights after she had seen it. She said that she had to close her eyes or look away from the screen many times throughout the movie. Recalling her experience, she said,

I put myself there. I just don't see how he did it. They beat him and beat him and beat him. They kept on and on. I don't think anybody without the divine nature that he had could have done it. I think a normal person would have died before they gave him the second beating. There is no way that a human person could have taken the punishment that he took.

The second category of gaps included the broader content of the film and more specifically the symbolism and depictions of mystical occurrences that viewers sought to understand. Among the most frequently mentioned scenes involved the presence of Satan.

Andrew commented that Satan's depiction in the Garden of Gethsemane was the first surprise. "I had seen a number of Passion Plays before and they had never depicted Satan's presence and I just had never realized that Satan was physically there. I just never thought about it being portrayed that way," he explained. Similarly, Aynette acknowledged that the opening scene distracted her from much of the rest of the movie: "I had never imagined Satan's dominance in the Garden. The Bible says Jesus struggled with what was before him, but it was an Angel who was present that gave him strength to accept God's will." This early depiction of Satan continued throughout the film and created great anxiety for Aynette who explained her discomfort with the overt presence of evil and lack of portrayals of holiness through divine presences.

Raymond, too, acknowledged the powerful role of Satan and indicated that it was Satan's physical presence that made the movie most affective:

It made me stop and realize just what a formidable foe we do face in our daily walk with Christ. It gave me a greater appreciation, as first John teaches: for greater is He that is within you than he that is in the world. And certainly Satan is, like the Bible say, a roaring lion. It reminded me that we have to walk circumspectly because this adversary that we saw in the very first scene of the movie attacking Jesus Christ and certainly we are not greater than our Lord. It made me realize that Satan will oppose my ministry as a pastor. Satan will oppose my relationship with my wife and to my daughter. It made me realize the importance of the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study as they will cultivate my walk with the Lord. That was my first impression of the movie that just how powerfully Satan is at work in this world.

Everyone who was interviewed expressed questions about the meaning behind the scene where Satan was shown to be holding an infant. A variety of interpretations exist among viewers. Catherine said that she continued to wonder about the meaning behind that scene and finally asked her priest. She explained: "In our faith, Mary always carried Jesus up close to her bosom just like he (Satan) was carrying that child. The priest more or less says that he (Satan) was mocking Mary packing Jesus up next to her bosom. It was like saying 'I still have my child, but yours is being put to death'." Similarly, Raymond explained how the scene made him question what message the film might be sending. "Was it a mock?" he asked. "Was Satan mocking Christ, saying, 'Where is your father? Why is your father not taking care of you? Has he abandoned you? Look how I draw unto my bosom my own, my demon child.' That [scene] really made me think about the movement of Satan, the cunningness and maliciousness of Satan."

Catherine offered another interpretation that she had heard: “Some people think it means that Satan can get to you at any age and that he doesn’t have to have horns like you used to think he did.”

Raymond observed that in Christianity today, the doctrine of Satan has been neglected and domesticated. “People really don’t see him as an enemy to be feared, as an enemy who does have a ravenous appetite to do evil and to do wickedness,” he said. “I think sometimes people do become conditioned to live with their sin and make peace with the Devil instead of standing firm against the Devil’s wicked schemes.” *The Passion of the Christ*’s depiction of Satan’s physical presence clearly brought a renewed interest in earthly embodiment of evil for many viewers of the film.

Other depictions of the movie also raised questions for the viewers. Also mentioned during the interviews was the significance of Jesus standing and crushing the head of the snake in the Garden, his physical act of resolve in accepting the forthcoming events as apart of God’s plan for the salvation of humankind. Viewers also seemed to cling to the few flashbacks which gave a broader picture of Christ’s earthly life. Aynette pointed out, “without those flashbacks we would have seen nothing about who Christ was and what had led up to his crucifixion.” Alan, a 12-year-old student who had gone to see the movie with his family, said one of his favorite parts was the interaction between Jesus and his mother, Mary, as Jesus was building the table that would require high chairs. The same scene which put a smile on Alan’s face produced a grimace for Aynette. “That was a little hokey,” she commented. “But I suppose there’s got to be those moments of comic relief in every movie.” Other elements of the movie that might be labeled as gap producing include the perceived levitation of the cross when it is flipped over so that the

soldiers are able to bend back the nails that had been driven through the crossbar and the rain or tear drop that falls from the sky immediately following Jesus' death on the cross.

Finally, the third category of gaps included the viewers' grappling with how to respond to the film. Ellen, who saw the film with a group of Christians, expressed frustration caused by other audience members' "inconsiderate" behaviors at the start of the film. "I could not believe that there were people who had bought popcorn to eat and who were still talking when the movie started," she explained. She went on to acknowledge that she had higher expectations of the experience comparable to what one would expect if they had been attending a church service.

Andrew, who initially had gone to see the film as an "intellectual exercise" and ended up having a personal and emotional experience, explained that he was and remained cynical about how many people had been relating to *The Passion of the Christ*. "It's kind of like when you go to church camp for a week and everybody gets saved and then you go home," he described. However, his own experience produced emotions that he did not know how to process. "I can't say that it was just a good movie," he explained. "To me it seemed like so much more than just a movie." As our conversation progressed, he tried to make sense of his experience:

I'm not saying that it's to be revered or that Mel Gibson is a saint or anything like that, but it's a very powerful film. To put it down on the level of discussion with other movies that are out ... I know that it's just a film but I get really ... I just don't see how people can ... I don't know, talk about it, in a light way ... to not *really* talk about it. To me, it ought to be something that only serious people should be able to see, not for some woman who is going to cry the whole way through it with her Kleenexes and the go jump in the mini-van and go pick up her kids or something. It's a very powerful, emotional

experience. It's kind of like a salvation experience. There are times and places when it should be talked about and there are times and places when it's just not appropriate.

Jean, on the other hand, had gone to the movie hoping for an emotion-filled experience but failed to achieve the catharsis that she had expected. "Maybe I just wasn't prepared for it spiritually," she suggested. "I guess it's like church where you have to be in the right frame of mind to really be blessed. While it was a very good movie from a technical point of view, it just didn't move me." Jean went on to say that she felt pressure to turn it into a dramatic experience as she began talking to others who had seen it. Likewise, Mike indicated that he feared that he had offended the friends he was with when he began criticizing the film as they were leaving the theater. "I was evaluating Gibson's technical acumen in the car when I was chided for being too critical," he recalled. "It made me feel sacrilegious for saying anything less than positive about the movie."

Building the Bridge and Evaluating the Outcomes

The third category of gaps just discussed actually begins to describe the desired outcomes (also labeled as "uses" by Sense-Making Methodology), "where he/she wanted to land after crossing the bridge" (Dervin, 2003b, p. 279). Dervin (2003a) describes this bridge building process and how individuals evaluate the outcomes:

"Given needs, people rely first on their own cognitive resources. If these are not sufficient, they reach out first to sources closest to them or those contacted on their habit paths. When they find useful information, they judge it not on its expertise or credibility, but rather in terms of how it helped them. They find it useful because they can put it to use. Only when it does not help do they focus on credibility and expertise of source or message as explanations of why what has offered did not help" (p. 226).

In the case of *The Passion of the Christ*, this study found that viewers have relied heavily upon their own cognitive resources in their attempt to make sense of what they had seen, heard, and experienced. Each interviewee reported being overwhelmed immediately after they had seen the film. Some expressed the desire to avoid conversation all together with others while other respondents described a temporary period in which they wanted to reflect upon what they had experienced. Aynette said, “I just didn’t want to talk to anyone about it until I had had time to think through it.”

After a period of intrapersonal communication, every person turned to other people who were closest to the—either physically or relationally—to aid in the sense-making process.

Andrew expressed great frustration with the singles group from his church who had planned to see the movie and then gather to discuss it. “Everybody got so carried away eating their Subway sandwiches that the conversation about the film relegated to superficial and completely meaningless chit-chat,” he said in an irritated tone.

Those who were unable to connect with others people turned to mass media. Jean described how she turned to Internet discussion boards to help her answer the questions that she had seen. “I started reading more and more spoilers to see what other people were saying. They were asking the same questions about the movie’s details that I had asked and then some that I hadn’t even thought about,” she said. “Reading how people had answered their questions really made me think about the movie, how it was made, and what it really meant.”

Conclusion

As this study found, *The Passion of the Christ* generated mixed reactions even among its targeted Christian audience. Unlike other movies and experiences, this film has forced Christian viewers to make sense of what they have seen depicted on the big screen. Its subject matter—

focusing on the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ—is not a foreign concept for the majority of viewers. Instead it is something that is upheld as centric to the Christian faith. It is spoken about, taught on, and discussed in churches and private schools across the nation. Therefore, Christian viewers bring to the cinema strongly held beliefs and assumptions about what they will see and how they (and others) should respond to it. Gibson’s blockbuster has challenged some of those preconceived ideas and forced viewers to make sense of their experience.

Analysis of all 15 interviews revealed that those who expressed the most positive perceptions of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* were those who had adequately bridged their gaps using a variety of communication channels and were satisfied with the outcomes. Nearly every respondent who had expressed angst about the film (i.e., graphic violence, unclear symbolism, and uncertainty about how to respond) articulated an understanding of a greater purpose and overarching message that they perceived had been communicated effectively.

John S. Smith (2004), director of the Evangelical Alliance UK, captured this spirit in an essay he wrote about his own experience viewing the film in Britain’s largest Cineplex. “To quibble over detail is to quibble over detail. For me the important thing is the overall impact of the film, the questions it raises, and the opportunity for productive conversation as a result,” he concluded. Raymond, the minister whom I interviewed, articulated what he thought were potentially the greatest effects of the film:

I think God has used this movie in more than one way—the cultivation of friendships between the lost and the saved; a renewal, in terms of Christians, for Bible study and the spiritual disciplines; and—I think God has used it a third way—giving people the desire to be more reflective and to really reflect upon matters related to the Christian faith, Christology, and the person of Jesus Christ. I think it has sparked some questions that

have given people incentive to go and dig further to find those answers to see how accurate this movie is.

This study begins to document how Christians have processed their mass media experiences related to this movie. The lack of resources—namely, time—has inhibited the recruitment and interviewing of a larger and more diverse group of respondents which would be more desirable in a research project of this nature. This fault is clearly the study's greatest limitation, but one that can be overcome with additional research.

Additionally, this study begins the process of extending Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology as an approach to examining audience reactions to films. For years, scholars (Davis et al, 1987; Stadler, 1990; Lindlof, 1991, 1996, 2002) have been driving toward a research method that considers how viewers make sense of their movie-going experiences. Further unpacking of Sense-Making may prove to be a fruitful endeavor because of philosophical underpinning are central to discovering the process by which individual construct their own understanding of their experiences.

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