

SOME USES OF CHRIST'S PASSION: THREE MODERN INSTANCES AND
A MEDIEVAL EXAMPLE

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In the great play (from 1973) *Equus*, Peter Shaffer puts his main character, a child psychiatrist in a British hospital named Martin Dysart, in the detective-like position of solving a crime: why would young (16 year old) Alan Strang blind 6 horses with a metal spike?

He talks to the boy; then—still early in the play, in the investigation—he talks to the boy's parents. From his mother, Dr. Dysart learns that the boy kept a picture of a horse in his room at the foot of his bed, where he could see it first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

From the boy's father, Frank, he learns the following:

DYSART: Would you say that she [Dora, Alan's mother] was closer to him than you are?

FRANK: They've always been thick as thieves. I can't say I entirely approve—especially when I hear her whispering that Bible to him hour after hour, up there in his room.

DYSART: Your wife is religious?

FRANK: Some might say excessively so. Mind you, that's her business. But when it comes to dosing it down the boy's throat—well, frankly, he's my son as well as hers. Of course, that's the funny thing about religious people. They always think their susceptibilities are more important than non-religious.

DYSART; And you're non-religious, I take it?

FRANK: I'm an atheist, and I don't mind admitting it. If you want my opinion, it's the Bible that's responsible for all this.

DYSART: Why?

FRANK: Well, look at it yourself. A boy spends night after night having this stuff read into him: an innocent man tortured to death—thorns driven into his head—nails into his hands—a spear jammed through his ribs. It can mark anyone for life, that kind of thing. I'm not joking. The boy was absolutely fascinated by all that. He was always mooning over religious pictures. I mean real kinky ones, if you receive my meaning. I had to put a stop to it once or twice!

A bit later in the play, Dysart speaks to the mother and learns more about the “kinky” pictures. She explains that the picture of the horse (all eyes, coming out at you) “took the place of another kind of picture altogether.”

DYSART: What kind?

DORA: It was a reproduction of Our Lord on his way to Calvary. Alan found it in Reed's Art Shop and absolutely fell in love with it. He insisted on buying it with his pocket money, and hanging it at the foot of his bed where he could see it last thing at night. My husband was very displeased.

DYSART: Because it was religious?

DORA: In all fairness I must admit it was a little extreme. The Christ was loaded down with chains, and the centurions were really laying on the stripes. It certainly would not have been my choice, but I don't believe in interfering too much with children, so I said nothing.

DYSART: But Mr. Strang did?

DORA: He stood it for a while but one day we had one of our tiffs about religion, and he went straight upstairs, tore it off the boy's wall and threw it in the dustbin. Alan went quite hysterical. He cried for days without stopping—and he was not a crier, you know.

DYSART: But he recovered when he was given the photograph of the horse in its place?

DORA: He certainly seemed to. At least, he hung it in exactly the same position, and we had no more of that awful weeping.

DYSART: Thank you, Mrs. Strang. That *is* interesting.

More than “interesting,” this transference of a suffering Christ to an all-seeing equine god is the key to what this fascinating play is all about. However, Shaffer does not allow his Dr. Dysart to explain *away* the boy’s brief psychotic episode by a too-facile diagnosis of psychologically “bad” religious art. Indeed, at the end of the play, he is at pains to explain that he can “cure” Alan—but only by removing his mental source of worship; and Dysart admires and even envies Alan for having that capacity for worship in his life.

So, in *Equus*, the graphic Passion of the suffering Christ is a disturbingly ambiguous image and source of psychic energy.

Ingmar Bergman’s only truly avant-garde or experimental film is his *Persona* from 1966. It begins with a series of apparently random images—film stock, a film projector, clips of silent comedies, a spider, a very quick shot of an erect phallus, and then a more extended image of a boy alone in a morgue-like room, lying a bed, reading, then waving his hand toward a mysterious image of a beautiful woman (his mother?). These are intercut twice by a shocking image of a nail being driven into a man’s hand. As Shaffer’s Frank Strang thought, these are the images that “can mark you for life.”

In *A Clockwork Orange* (1968), Stanley Kubrick’s frightening essay on our human proclivity for violence (especially as it connects to our creativity), the main character, named Alex, after several episodes of enjoying some of “the old ultra-violence” is sent to prison to be reformed. In a bitingly ironic sequence, Alex, who piously assists the prison chaplain, is reading the New Testament and *quite* enjoys the passages about the crown of thorns and the stripping and beating. While he has a seraphic look on his face, we see into his mind: he sees himself as a centurion (“dressed in the height of Roman fashion,” he assures us) enthusiastically whipping Christ carrying his cross. So the chaplain laying his hand gently and approvingly on Alex’s shoulder is, to say the least, the more deceived. In effect, Kubrick anticipates some of Mel Gibson’s hostile critics who complain that there

is a strong element of homo-erotic sado-masochistic pornography in *The Passion of the Christ*.

One recurring Catholic service (in addition to the annual Tre Ore portion of the Good Friday service) is known as the Stations of the Cross, a part of the Church since medieval times (and set by many composers). This service has as its purpose precisely what Mel Gibson was after in his *Passion*—the stirring up of a strong emotional reaction to, and identification with, Christ's sufferings.

Images of each of the 14 stations adorn nearly all Catholic churches throughout the world; they can be used as private aids to prayer and also as pivot points in ceremonies through Lent and culminating in the Good Friday services. If the church is filled, the priest, perhaps assisted by some acolytes, leads a small procession and stops at each of the stations. Here are the 14 stations of the cross:

1. Jesus is condemned to die.
2. Jesus carries his cross.
3. Jesus falls the first time.
4. Jesus meets his mother.
5. Simon helps Jesus to carry his cross.
6. Veronica wipes Jesus' face.
7. Jesus falls the second time
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.
9. Jesus falls the third time.
10. Jesus is stripped.
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross.
12. Jesus dies on the cross.
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross.
14. Jesus is laid in the tomb.

It is fascinating to observe that roughly half of the stations (4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 14) show Jesus being helped or comforted—a proportion and even an emphasis that is totally missing from Mel Gibson's gruesomely violent film. Even the medievals seemed to see that the Passion story was about compassion.