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Disciplines

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Article

Introduction

[1] Theoretical treatments of biblical violence have yet to mature in film and religion studies. Even a brief survey in the bibliography of film studies shows that the key words "violence" or "violent" appear very seldom in titles of books and articles on the Bible and film. For example, a search of the keyword "violence" in titles of the *Journal of Religion and Film* yields only two articles.¹ There are still no monographs devoted to the filmic depictions of biblical violence.

[2] When biblical violence is the main topic of scholarship, it is usually because a film bears extraordinary violence. This is certainly the case with Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) which generated a cluster of books on the issue.² But, in general, there is insufficient attention to the complexity of techniques and gradations of violence that are present in biblical films.

[3] Accordingly, this paper seeks to remedy this situation by proposing a new typology that applies to the entire history of the filmic depiction of biblical violence. Briefly, there are five logical techniques by

which a film may address violence in biblical stories: 1) *Deletion*, whereby a violent episode is completely omitted from a biblical story; 2) *Addition*, whereby a violent episode is added to a biblical story; 3) *Minimization* of an existing episode of biblical violence; 4) *Maximization*, which enhances an existing episode of biblical violence; 5) *Reconfiguration* of the roles of the perpetrators and/or justifiability of the violence.

[4] This typology, in turn, serves as a tool to support my thesis that the depiction of biblical violence still centers on apologetics. That is to say, most films depicting biblical violence seek to justify the violence by biblical protagonists, be they human or divine, through a variety of techniques. Biblical heroes are depicted as engaging in justified violence. Enemies of biblical protagonists are normally depicted as engaging in wanton and brutal violence. All of this serves a larger function of retaining an image of the Bible as a document of peace and justice.

Theoretical and socio-historical background

[5] In an article, "Religion and Violence in Popular Film," published in 1999 in *The Journal of Religion and Film*, Bryan Stone introduced a typology to study how violence is addressed in popular films. One of Stone's main contentions was that film rarely portrays religion as the antidote to violence. Rather, religion is often used to legitimize violence. In addition, Stone remarks, "Religion, religious faith, religious space, and religious symbols have become in the hands of popular film, little more than useful filmic conventions in the service of violence as entertainment."³ Stone, in turn, relies on the ideas of Margaret Miles, who argues that "[f]or media-literate Americans, violence is entertainment; a film cannot use violent images to communicate a different message."⁴

[6] While Stone's thesis may be valid for popular films, I argue that filmmakers can have a protectionist and religionist view when addressing violence in the Bible. That is to say, filmmakers of biblical stories rarely depict the violence by biblical protagonists as unjustified, whereas the opposite is the case with violence done by "pagans" in those texts (those who do not espouse the biblical religious viewpoints associated with Judaism or Christianity). In biblical films, therefore, how violence is portrayed can serve apologetic functions rather than just entertainment functions.

[7] All definitions of violence are value-laden insofar as we choose the type of suffering and violence we value.⁵ We define violence as the act of modifying and/or inflicting pain upon the human body in order to express or impose power differentials.⁶ By this definition, pain or bodily modification can be inflicted upon a person by others or it can be self-inflicted, as in the case of self-flagellation and martyrdom. There are degrees of violence, and killing is regarded as the ultimate imposition of a power differential on the body. As long as an action relating to the expression of power modifies or inflicts pain upon a physical body, it is defined as violent, whether such injury is justified or not.

[8] While there are no monographs about filmic depictions of biblical violence, there are a few monographs devoted to violence in film. One of the most important is Stephen Prince's *Screening Violence* (2000), which focuses on the role of the Production Code, a set of guidelines adopted in 1934 by the Production Code Administration, the arm of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) assigned to regulate the content of movies.⁷ Prince argues that the Production Code (hereafter, the Code) generally minimized violence from 1934, when the Code began to be applied systematically, to the late sixties, when the Code was rendered obsolete by the introduction of a new movie ratings system. Graphic and realistic depictions of violence emerged thereafter, aided greatly by improved special effects technology.

[9] The impact of the Code on regulating films has been hotly contested in recent decades, and especially after the release in the 1980s of the vast files of the MPPDA.⁸ Briefly, scholars divide themselves into those who think the Code was more symbolic than effective, and those who think the Catholic Church, in particular, used it to censor movies quite effectively.⁹

[10] In any case, the Code is premised on the idea that "art can be morally evil."¹⁰ Immorality must not be presented as attractive. The Code enforcers worried about the public imitating bad behaviors shown on the screen.¹¹ More specifically, the Code directed that "Brutal killings should not be presented in detail."¹² However, upon reading the Code, it becomes apparent that regulations pertaining to sex, rather than to violence, occupied the most space.

[11] In addition, the Code was preoccupied with protecting religion. The religionist view of the Code is enshrined in a whole section on religion, which states:

No film or episode in a film should be allowed to throw ridicule on any religious faith honestly maintained. Ministers of religion in their characters or ministers should not be used in comedy, as villains, or as unpleasant persons...Religion is lowered in the minds of the audience because it lowers their respects for the ministers.¹³

An earlier body, The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, which was established in 1909, also proscribed "scenes sacrilegious or offensive to religious convictions."¹⁴ By extending this rationale, we can surmise that biblical characters should not be shown committing any sort of unjustified act because it might lower the audience's respect for religion.

[12] While it is true that the demise of the Code in the 1960s offered new avenues to explore sexuality and violence, films remained very protective of biblical protagonists. This follows the broader trend in western scholarship which still views the Bible as a superior cultural document that promotes peace, love, and justice. A few voices, of course, have shown greater ambivalence and contradiction in biblical attitudes toward justice and violence, but the dominant force is still a religionist and protectionist one when it comes to filmic depictions.¹⁵

A new typology

[13] In order to illustrate the religionist and apologetic approach to biblical depictions on film, we introduce a typology that will show how the variety and complexity of these filmic techniques still retain a protectionist approach. These techniques introduced above can be illustrated by following almost the entire span of Jesus films from *The Life and Passion of Christ (Vie et la passion de Jésus Christ)* directed by Lucien Nonguet and Ferdinand Zecca) in 1903 to *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, as well as by filmic depictions of the life of Moses.¹⁶ More specifically, we compare these episodes in films:

Moses Films:

- A. The killing of the Hebrew children by the Pharaoh
- B. The killing of the Egyptian by Moses
- C. The killing of the firstborn by Yahweh, the biblical god.

Jesus films:

- A. The killing of the innocents by Herod
- B. The Cleansing of the Temple by Jesus
- C. The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus

[14] We have chosen Jesus and Moses films for a number of reasons. One is that it is well-known that some Jesus stories were patterned on the Moses narratives (e.g., killing of the innocents). In addition, these are probably the most authoritative characters in the entire Bible. They offer a model for how violence is deployed by their followers.

[15] Deletion of violence is the most difficult to study from a methodological viewpoint. Violent episodes may be omitted for a variety of reasons. Filmmakers select what they think is important, and those reasons are not always apologetic. Jesus films, in particular, never show all the episodes narrated in the Gospels. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew* (*Il Vangelo Secondo Mateo*, 1964) is not expected to have the Cleansing of the Temple as depicted in John. This is important because it is only in the Gospel of John (2:15) that we find Jesus using a whip during his cleansing.

[16] The clearest examples of deletion are in the episodes dealing with Jewish violence against Jesus. All the Gospels mention that Jesus was struck, presumably by some Jews, at the hearing before the High Priest (Matthew 26:67, Mark 14:65, Luke 22:63, John 18:22). Yet only two films, *The Gospel of John* (Philip Saville, 2003) and *The Passion of the Christ*, depict this episode. Some films that omit this episode still do include beatings or scourgings from the Romans at the corresponding trial by the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate---e.g., Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and *King of Kings* (Nicholas Ray, 1961).

[17] The reason for such a deletion is clearest in Cecile B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), which omits the scene where Jesus stands before Caiaphas altogether (as does the remake). We know, from correspondence between the MPPDA and B'Nai Berith, a prominent Jewish civil rights organization, that intense negotiations were undertaken in order to avoid casting blame upon the Jews. According to film historian Richard Maltby, the final agreement involved "the addition of titles attributing responsibility for the crucifixion solely to Caiaphas, and considerable toning down of details in the scourging and crucifixion scenes."¹⁷

[18] In their book, *Biblical Epics*, Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, offer similar reasons for omitting the episode before Caiaphas in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988):

While the dominant attitude of the film to Judaism is that Christianity rescues it from its concepts of monotheism expressed in parochial forms, the film also redeems the grossly caricatured Caiaphas of the novel, presenting him as a figure of fierce dignity. And even more than any of the other films *The Last Temptation* avoids the fraught matter of Jesus' trials, dramatising only the interrogation by Pilate.¹⁸

Indeed, despite the radical portrayal of Jesus' sexuality in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the film is still quite conservative in how it portrays acts of violence by Jesus, as well.

[19] Minimization of an existing episode of violence can be seen in the story of the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. The biblical passage (Exodus 12:23, 29-30, Revised Standard Version) says:

23 : For the LORD will pass through to slay the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not allow

the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you...

29 : At midnight the LORD smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle.

30 : And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where one was not dead.

The mode of death is unclear in our English translations, but the Hebrew word (*nkh*), translated as "smote" or "struck," often indicates death through violent means, such as striking someone with an instrument. The idea that a "destroyer" (Exodus 12:23) would need blood to identify Hebrew homes also connotes some sort of angel of death. In fact, Exodus 12:23 uses the same Hebrew word (*mashkhit*) used to describe an angel, who uses a sword, in 1 Chronicles 21:15-16:

15 : And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it; but when he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw, and he repented of the evil; and he said to the destroying angel, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jeb'usite.

16 : And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem.

This suggests that The Destroyer kills by using a sword. Yet, none of the Moses films show any sort of violent death for these children. In DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, the children simply go to sleep gently after a clawlike cloud descends to the earth and enters Egyptian homes. In the TV miniseries version of the *Ten Commandments*, a fog spreads and the firstborn children just go limp. *The Prince of Egypt* (Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner and Simon Wells, 1998) depicts a child's arm falling gently and projecting outward from a doorway as an indicator of his death.

[20] Another instance of minimization occurs in the Cleansing of the Temple by Jesus. As we have remarked, only John 2:15 mentions a whip:

And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

It does appear as though Jesus is applying the whip to the merchants. Raymond E. Brown, the authoritative Johannine scholar, says: "Seemingly, Jesus used the whip on the merchants."¹⁹ Indeed, it is difficult to understand how Jesus would have been able to cast out a crowd, which could have easily overpowered him, if he did not use some sort of powerful violent instrument.

[21] As already mentioned, we would not expect Pasolini's *Gospel According to Matthew* to show Jesus whipping people. We do have a whip shown in *The King of Kings* (1927), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (George Stevens, 1965), and *The Gospel of John*.²⁰ Yet, in all of those films Jesus only whips empty space or barely raises the whip at all. No one is ever struck directly with the whip. DeMille offers the following remarks on this scene in *The King of Kings* :

The slightest trace of overacting would have ruined it...
He simply picked up a leather thong and wrapped one end of it

around his hand, but with such authority that it was entirely believable when the money-changers fled in confusion from a Christ whose anger was the more terrible because so perfectly controlled.²¹

A controlled anger is what DeMille also says Moses had as a great trait.²² Clearly, more than entertainment is in the mind of DeMille. Controlled anger is very much a part of his Christology and ethics. Uncontrolled anger and violence typifies pagans.

[22] Maximization of existing violence may be seen most often in stories about the violence perpetrated by pagans. This is the case with the killing of children by Pharaoh (Exodus 1:15-22) in *The Prince of Egypt*. Whereas Egyptian children killed by the Hebrew god go to sleep gently, Egyptians snatch Hebrew babies violently away from mothers. The film depicts Hebrew children cast into the Nile where hungry alligators await them. The casting into the Nile is mentioned in the biblical text (Exodus 1:22), but no mention is made of alligators eating those children alive. Violent, albeit not very graphic, rampages can be seen in *Jesus of Nazareth* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1977) and in *The Greatest Story ever Told* when depicting Herod's infanticidal commands.

[23] Maximization of existing violent episodes is most clear in *The Passion of the Christ*. Gibson added or enhanced violence based, in part, on the meditations on the crucifixion published by Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), a German mystic nun.²³ John Dominic Crossan comments, "In all the cases that I can recall, Gibson, accepts or escalates the brutality described by Emmerich. I cannot recall a single instance where he diminishes it."²⁴

[24] While the Bible says that Jesus was flogged (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, Luke 23:16, John 19:1), Gibson has a Roman soldier flog Jesus to such a bloody length that a Roman supervisor has to intervene. The Bible says a crown of thorns was placed on Jesus' head, but Gibson has a soldier push the thorns deep into Jesus' flesh with a stick. It is true that Gibson shows Peter violently lopping off the ear of a Roman soldier (per John 18:10), but Gibson also shows Peter being rebuked by Jesus for this violence. Peter's violence is portrayed as a momentary and reprimanded lapse, while Roman violence against Jesus is portrayed as wanton and sportful.

[25] The religionist reason for the maximization of violence against Jesus is made clear by Mel Gibson himself. According to an interview with Bill O'Reilly (*The O'Reilly Factor*, Feb. 27, 2004), Gibson wanted viewers to "find the beauty" in the bloodbath of Jesus' torture.²⁵ Gibson hopes that his film will raise our appreciation for the suffering of Christ, and perhaps convert a few hard-hearted non-believers to his version of Christianity. For Gibson, violence has missionary and salvific purposes rather than an entertainment purpose.

[26] Addition of violent episodes are again most apparent in *The Passion of the Christ*. While the Bible does not mention Jesus being beaten in the Garden of Gethsemane, Gibson adds such a beating by Roman soldiers. After leaving Gethsemane, a chained Jesus is flung off a bridge and ends up in an agonizing suspension made worse by being hoisted back up by the same chains. This brutal episode is nowhere in any Gospel account. A crow pecks out the eye of one of the crucified thieves, which is not in the Bible.

[27] Reconfiguration of violence is best seen, in our corpus, in the stories of the killing of an Egyptian by Moses. Reconfiguration means that the roles of the perpetrator and victim are changed so that the

justification is different from that offered in the Bible. The biblical text depicts this incident as follows in Exodus 2:11-15:

11 : One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people.

12 : He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

13 : When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together; and he said to the man that did the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow?"

14 : He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid, and thought, "Surely the thing is known."

15 : When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

Clearly, this qualifies as a pre-meditated murder today. The text ("seeing no one") implies that this act happened in the absence of the Hebrew who was beaten and after Moses saw the beating.

[28] Cecil B. DeMille reconfigures this episode by having Moses kill the Egyptian while trying to liberate Joshua (John Derek) from Baka (Vincent Price), the Egyptian master builder. Baka is about to whip a restrained Joshua, when Moses enters and snatches the whip away. Moses then seizes Baka and breaks his neck. So Moses does not commit a pre-meditated murder as much as he commits a sort of manslaughter to protect Joshua, who was in imminent danger. Yet, DeMille admitted that "Moses had a murderously violent temper" that he was eventually able to control.²⁶

[29] In the TV miniseries, *The Ten Commandments* (Robert [Ben] Dornhelm, 2006), Moses intervenes when he sees an Egyptian trying to rape a Hebrew woman who is accompanied by her husband. As Moses tries to intervene, he knocks the Egyptian against a pylon, and the Egyptian dies from the injury. Thus, the movie reconfigures Moses' pre-meditated homicide into an accidental killing in the midst of defending a potential rape victim. Moses is fully justified.

[30] A more radical reconfiguration appears in *The Prince of Egypt*, a DreamWorks SKG animated film targeted at a teen or pre-teen audience. In this film, Moses accidentally knocks an Egyptian slavedriver off a scaffold. Moses was trying to stop the Egyptian from hitting a Hebrew slave. The accident happens in full view of many witnesses. Moreover, the future Pharaoh (Ramesses), who was raised as a brother to Moses, explicitly and publicly absolves Moses of any guilt.

Conclusion

[31] The depiction of biblical violence is varied and complex. While Margaret Miles and Bryan Stone may be correct in affirming that popular films depict violence for entertainment purposes, we find much more complex and apologetic reasons in films depicting biblical violence. At least in biblical films, the depiction of violence is often linked to defending the Bible as a superior moral guide. From at least 1909, The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures discouraged anything derisive of religion.

[32] The Code of 1934 also forbade graphic depictions of killing. Thus, we cannot expect a lot of graphic violence by protagonists or antagonists during the Code period. Deletion and minimization reigned under the Code. Yet, the Code explicitly directed that religious characters be depicted positively.

We can see that there was a difference in how violence by biblical protagonists could be reconfigured to justify them. Reconfiguration was always applied to Moses' killing of the Egyptian, whereas no justification is ever offered for the Egyptian beating the Hebrew slave (e.g., could that have been reconfigured into self-defense?).

[33] On the other hand, addition and maximization of the violence is the standard for pagan acts of violence against biblical champions. That is certainly the case with *The Passion of the Christ*, which has extremely graphic violence perpetrated by Romans and Jews against Christ. Hammering of the nails into Jesus' hands, albeit shown at a distance, is already there in the *Life and Passion of Christ* (1903), which certainly would be a Pre-Code movie. But it is clear that addition and maximization became prominent after the 1960s, after the Code ceased to exist. Yet, with few exceptions, enhanced violence is still mainly on the part of the antagonists against biblical protagonists.

[34] Reconfiguration remains the most stable and consistent technique throughout all filmic history. The Code makes it clear that men of God are not to be portrayed negatively. However, it is clear that reconfiguration exists before and after the Code. Reconfiguration serves an apologetic function insofar as a Moses is never portrayed as just a plain murderer, and a Jesus is never portrayed as a madman with a whip.

[35] Historically, Jews form the one exception where the antagonists of a biblical champion are treated in a protectionist manner. There was an understandable sensitivity to how blaming Jews for Christ's death or for violence against Christ could be used to foment anti-Jewish violence. This is clearest in *The King of Kings* (1927). The principal exception to this exception, of course, is *The Passion of the Christ*, which was heavily criticized by Jewish groups for this very reason.

[36] Our typology is merely a starting point for further explorations into the complexity of how biblical violence is addressed. Certainly, it may need to be refined to accommodate gradations of minimization and maximization, in particular. But it is clear already that the depiction of biblical violence is actually quite conservative insofar as it seeks to protect the moral superiority of biblical characters. Filmmakers still depict the Bible's main characters as justified and bearing higher ethics in their use of violence. Even films that have radical portrayals of Jesus's sexuality (*The Last Temptation of Christ*), will not violate the image of a benign and non-violent Jesus. The best explanation is that, despite all the seeming religious radicality of modern film making, validating and justifying violence by biblical heroes is still the reigning paradigm.

Grouped Notes

FILM CREDITS		
<u><i>From the Manger to the Cross</i></u>	<u><i>Gospel According to St. Matthew</i></u>	<u><i>The Gospel of John</i></u>
<u><i>Greatest Story Ever Told</i></u>	<u><i>Jesus of Nazareth</i></u>	<u><i>King of Kings</i></u> (1927)
<u><i>King of Kings</i></u> (1961)	<u><i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i></u>	<u><i>La vie et la passion de Jésus Christ</i></u> (<i>The Life and Passion of Christ</i>)
<u><i>The Passion of the Christ</i></u>	<u><i>The Prince of Egypt</i></u>	<u><i>The Ten Commandments</i></u>
	<u><i>The Commandments</i></u> (TV)	



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