

The Passion of the Movies

'The Passion of the Christ' is the latest to show the power of movies to move us.

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WebMD Feature

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Upon its release this Ash Wednesday, Mel Gibson's new film *The Passion of Christ* is sure to add to the passionate debate already surrounding the film. In the process, the film is poised to join a select list of films that highlight the unique ability of movies to sometimes go beyond mere entertainment to something more universal ... call it movie magic?

For a start, *The Passion of the Christ* is one of the first R-rated movies in a while that has moviemakers and marketers encouraging young and old alike to see the film.

The Passion of Movies

But what is it about movies, in particular, that can affect us with emotions, insights and inspiration ?

The Passion of the Christ has a lot of impact because there is a lot of charge surrounding it, says Oakland, Calif.-based cinema therapist Birgit Wolz, PhD.

However, Wolz tells WebMD, "an article or book would not have this much impact because all of our senses are affected through movies," Wolz says. "Our psyche is much more directly impacted by movies, especially when we hear music that arouses emotions as we watch."

Movies affect us through more than the story they are telling, she says. "They also elicit emotions by stimulating our senses: sight through visual images and hearing through music and other sounds. Directors use visual effects, spatial relations, timing, sound effects, and music to prompt the emotions of the audience in a particular direction, thus widening the range of their perception."

For Better or for Worse ...

"Movies are like a proverbial hammer, you can use them for good or for bad," she says. "They can re-traumatize people if they are so powerful and violent, and if people are not treated, they can worsen

anxiety and depression."

For example, families may be re-traumatized when they see Holocaust movies such as *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist*. Other movies, too, can remind viewers of a traumatic event or loss.

Vietnam-era movies like *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* help raise consciousness about what happened in Vietnam. The effect "really depends who is seeing it, but I believe that these movies can make us more aware of what's happening in a war and learn compassion and empathy," she says.

Suspended Disbelief at Play

Gary Solomon, PhD, MPH, MSW, author of *The Motion Picture Prescription* and *Reel Therapy* and a professor of psychology at the Community College of Southern Nevada, agrees with Wolz when it comes to the power of movies.

"Movies are very visual as opposed to books, where we must visualize the story on our own, so with movies we are getting a story along with visual image, and that creates a very powerful impact," he says.

Suspended disbelief is also at work, Solomon says. "This is a process where we view something and for an hour-and-a-half to two hours and suspend our disbelief about the story and what's going on around us and accept the concept for what it is," Solomon explains.

"People will undoubtedly look at [*The Passion of the Christ*], suspend their disbelief, and will, for whatever period of time, believe that this is exactly the story that took place," Solomon says.

That has left many people fearful that the film will spark anti-Semitic sentiments because of how the film portrays the involvement of Jews in Jesus' death.

Lost in Translation

The 1991 movie *JFK* focused on the conspiracy theory surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. "After seeing that film, the contrived story became reality, and that is a problem because we can change the truth through film if enough people watch that material," he says.

"Movies have the potential to do good if the information is factual and presented fairly, but often in the name of drama or entertainment, it is

not," he says.

First and foremost, he says, all of these movies are entertainment, and so often we take them for more. Much more.

"One of the interesting things that happened with [the 1990 Julia Roberts movie] *Pretty Woman* was that a certain amount of people thought that they may find true love if they became a prostitute and/or picked up a prostitute," he says.

"Novels or history can galvanize people, but movies have something special about them, especially when we go to a theater and we are in the dark, sitting back and relaxing with a group of people who are experiencing the same thing, and we get caught up in the emotional experience," says William Jeffrey, MD, a psychoanalyst in New York and a clinical associate professor of New York University.

For example, [the 1915 film] *The Birth of a Nation* had a very pernicious effect on racism and the rebirth of Ku Klux Klan," he says. *The Birth of a Nation* looked at what happened in the South after the Civil War.

As far as the upcoming *The Passion of the Christ*, people have to wait and see. But Jeffrey says he can understand the concern because throughout the ages anti-Semitism has been fueled by the idea that the Jews killed Christ.

What happens next, will depend a lot on how Christ's death is portrayed in the film, he says.

"What people think is history is based on film these days," he says, noting that whenever he thinks of the Alamo, he pictures the 1960 film in which John Wayne (who played Davy Crockett) wore a raccoon hat. *The Alamo* is the story of a small band of soldiers who sacrificed their lives in hopeless combat against a massive army to prevent a tyrant from smashing the new Republic of Texas.

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SOURCES: Gary Solomon, MPH, MSW, PhD, author, *The Motion Picture Prescription* and *Reel Therapy*; professor of psychology; Community College of Southern Nevada. Birgit Wolz, PhD, psychotherapist, Oakland, Calif. William Jeffrey, MD, clinical associate professor, New York University.
