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THE LIFE OF MARY IN FILM

Marian Films in the Twentieth Century

*Michael Duricy, S.T.L.**

The title of this article differs somewhat from its topic in ways both great and small. Of minor importance, one may note that the first century of cinema only approximates the twentieth century, since the first public showing of a film is considered to be the exhibition of documentary footage showing workers leaving a factory produced by the Lumière brothers in Paris on December 28, 1895. (Versions of this historically notable piece are readily accessible for viewing on the Internet, for example, on YouTube.) Films related to the life of Mary also arrived before the turn into the twentieth century. H. Hurd filmed the famous *Passion Play of Oberammergau* in 1897 for the Lumières, while W. Freeman directed the filming of a folk procession in Horitz, Bohemia, which portrayed the passion of Jesus. In addition to this newsreel footage, the first motion picture dealing with Jesus' life that was produced from an original script and filmed on a set was made in 1898 (perhaps 1899) under the direction of L. Vincent and given the deliberately misleading title *Passion Play of Oberammergau*. A copy of this film, restored from original footage by the George Eastman House, is kept in the collection of The Marian Library; it includes scenes from Sigmund Lubin's *Passion Play* filmed around the same time. Finally, *Sign of the Cross*, a "Life of Christ" film directed by Walter Haggart in Great Britain, also appeared shortly before 1900.

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Of greater importance, it should be noted that Marian references in film are not limited to treatments of her "life," even if that term is extended to apparition films which present the life of Mary in the glorified state. It is much more common for film-makers to allude to Mary in a symbolic way—for example, with a statue, painting, rosary, hymn, or verbal statement—within a film that is not specifically treating a New Testament account or any Marian apparition which occurred later. In addition to these film dramas, many documentaries (and even recorded lectures) have made reference to the mother of Jesus. This article, however, will be limited to dramatic films in which Mary appears as a living character.

The bulk of these films, about sixty five, fall into what are commonly called "Life of Christ" films. The making of such religious films helped create an aura of respectability for the new medium. As noted earlier, these films appeared not long after the birth of cinema. In fact, during this early period of film history (ca. 1900-1930), films showing the life of Jesus formed an important genre within the field. This class of films provided the primary locus for the presentation of Mary's life to the general public through the mass medium of cinema. Many prominent and well-known film pioneers made contributions to this genre. Especially noteworthy is Pathé's two-reel *La Passion de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ* directed by Ferdinand Zecca in 1907. The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communication (PCSC) listed it in the 'Religion' category of their 1995 list of important films.

Alice Guy Blaché was the first known female film director. Besides filming documentary footage of the monastery on Montserrat for Gaumont in 1906, she also made a dramatic film about the life of Christ for the Gaumont studio around the same time. (This drama is available from Amazon.com in a boxed set of three DVDs called *Gaumont Treasures 1897-1913*.) D. W. Griffith included scenes from the life of Jesus (including Mary) in his 1916 melodrama *Intolerance: Love's Struggle through the Ages*. Robert Wiene, who became famous for introducing the "German Expressionist" movement in film, directed a film entitled *I.N.R.I.* in 1923. Henny Porten, one of Germany's most important early film stars, played the Virgin Mary.

Cecil B. De Mille produced *King of Kings* in 1927, shortly before sound technology transformed the medium. This film began with Jesus' adult years. H. B. Warner gave a well-regarded performance as a noble Jesus, but a very human and likable Jesus. Dorothy Cumming gave a romanticized portrayal of Mary as extremely gentle and friendly. Like many women who would later play the role of the maid of Nazareth, Cumming was from Ireland.

As "talkies" and three-color technicolor became the norm, the "Life of Christ" film as a distinct and prominent genre faded from importance. A succession of stylistic periods then occurred, and the styles which characterized each of those eras had an influence on many of the films produced at those times, including those which presented the life of Mary. After the initial offerings of newsreel footage, melodramas, and the "Life of Christ" genre, the next important cinematic development was the so-called "golden age of Hollywood" which lasted from around 1930 to 1950. Its characteristic style might be described as "fantasy-epic."

A Motion Picture Production Code, administered by the Hays Office (named for Will H. Hays, Hollywood's most prominent censor in this period), took effect in the 1930s. These guidelines had a significant chilling effect on the production of religious films during this time. This code placed restrictions on the style of religious portrayals allowed. For example, negative portrayals of any religion, or of official representatives of any religion, were not permitted. Hollywood preferred flight to fight on this issue and few films showing the Gospel stories appeared.

In 1934, Wiene's *I.N.R.I.* from 1923 was re-released with a sound track as *Crown of Thorns*. Julien Duvivier's 1935 French film, *Ecce Homo*, became the first film on the Life of Christ to include sound from the start. Juliette Verneuil played Mary. Few other offerings of this type were released during the so-called golden age of Hollywood. Into the 1940s, only a few more titles were added to this film category (e.g. José Díaz Morales's *Jesus de Nazareth* [1942] and Miguel Morayta Martinez's *El Martir del Calvario* [1950], both made in Mexico). The fact that this small group of New Testament films only includes films made

outside the United States illustrates how the well-intentioned Hays Production Code effectively eliminated exposure to the figures of Jesus and Mary on the screen at the very time that the motion picture industry prospered in the United States: the public attending in droves.

There was some important Marian content in William Dieterle's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* from 1939, a year which also saw the release of classics like *Stagecoach*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, too. However, Dieterle's film was more a fantasy-epic than a religious film, and Mary's life was not shown at all, even as part of an apparition. The most significant Marian film from this period was *Song of Bernadette* (1943). Jennifer Jones' portrayal of the visionary as hyperbolically innocent and gentle earned her the Academy Award for Best Actress that year. The movie is still occasionally shown on the American Movie Classics (AMC) cable channel. Though filmed in black and white, with an iconic rather than realistic heroine, there is still much to recommend it. The film shows explicit footage of Mary as a living character in the drama, though manifest as an apparition. Linda Darnell gave the image and voice to Mary in scenes fairly concrete and mundane, with little to distinguish her from the flesh and blood Mary in, say, Cecil B. De Mille's *King of Kings*.

As noted earlier, beyond these few examples, Hollywood offered little in the way of showing Mary's life on the screen during this period. The devout among the general audience were not the only people unsatisfied by the limited variety of content and style which characterized the golden age of Hollywood. Fantasy-epics may be entertaining, but many viewers came to insist on more realistic presentations. Cinematic artists responded with a series of movements along these lines from the early 1940s through the present day, with 1942 to 1959 delineating the general contours of a movement toward more realistic portrayals of situations emphasizing human imperfection and Italian Neo-realism as its primary influence.

About 1946, Italy's best directors, often constrained by post-war realities, made films starring non-professionals, shooting in available light, using the ravaged city as background. The best

known of these films is Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), which made the aforementioned 1995 PCSC list of outstanding films in the 'Values' category. The film told the story of an Italian worker desperately seeking the lost bicycle needed for his livelihood.

Roberto Rossellini pioneered the Italian Neo-realist movement with films like *Rome, Open City* in 1945. However, this contribution to Marian cinema mixed the appearance of Neo-realism with an allegorical plot aimed at social critique. Anna Magnani gave a stellar performance as a simple peasant who believes she has met Saint Joseph and conceived virginally. The plot suggests that she has been violated while drunk. However, apart from the pregnancy, no evidence of intercourse was shown. On the contrary, the title implies that the conception is a miracle of God. This ambiguity allows the film to be seen as a stylized allegory of the Nativity or as a realistic tale of the abuse of a good-hearted but underprivileged woman. In either case, the film criticizes those who claim to be Christian and still inflict hardship on the needy. It is clear that Rossellini's villains would have treated the Virgin Mother of the Gospels no better.

American films had also been moving away from the light plots and idealized heroes of Hollywood's golden age. The style called *film noir*, used often for detective fiction, gave the same low-light, black-and-white appearance, and showed the same flawed protagonists as Neo-Realist films. *Noir* was, in fact, more pessimistic than Italian Neo-realism and was often preoccupied with the basest human instincts. A defining example was Billy Wilder's 1944 film, *Double Indemnity*.

This emphasis on human limitations came to extend far beyond the seedy criminal realm of detective fiction. In 1952, *High Noon* presented Gary Cooper as a weak, frightened, unpopular man cast in the role of town sheriff as crisis looms. In *The Nun's Story* (1959), Audrey Hepburn portrayed a talented, sincere, young religious who eventually abandoned her order. Still, this tendency of projecting the trajectory of Italian Neo-realism into the spectrum of later American movie fare, had little effect on American religious films in the 1950s. The movement to realism did little to correct the dearth of Christian

films brought on as a response to the Hays Code and by the commercial success of merely entertaining films.

Noticing the situation, confessional organizations (e.g., Cathedral Films, Family Films, and the Catholic Father Patrick Peyton's Family Theater) sought to fill the gap with independent productions made starting in the 1950s. A number of "Life of Christ" films were made in this decade, several directed by John T. Coyle, Irving Pichel, and Edward Dew. All these films were essentially illustrated Bibles; and the stories come off as devout, but shallow. For example, in *I Beheld His Glory*, biblical literalism was taken to an extreme as John and Mary walk towards Jesus on the cross, where they listen to the words reported in John 19:6, and then exit. The woman portraying the mother of Jesus was not even listed in the credits.

The films done by Family Theater in 1957 to illustrate the Rosary mysteries exhibit a similar devotional tone but, by drawing on the broad Catholic tradition, were more expansive with their plots. A break with cinematic conventions came in the 1960s, both in America and Europe, both in secular and religious films, with various "news waves" starting with the French *nouvelle vague* in 1959. Thematic content, moral perspectives, narrative style and visual construction were all freed from the "tradition of quality," that is, the artistic norms of D. W. Griffith and the moral norms of the Hays Code.

Characteristics of the *nouvelle vague* included filming on location, improvisation, homages to admired directors, and elliptical editing. However, this movement soon ceased to function as a collective phenomenon and it became difficult to define. The common link among French film-makers was a general reaction against the established "tradition of quality." The American New Wave was, for example, radical merely in terms of content—with much sex and violence. New Wave movements also occurred in other countries. However, apart from criticism of Communist repression by directors in Eastern Europe, the only thing defining many of these national movements was their relative unconventionality.

The effects of these new trends were seen in Marian films from the period. In this area, the general reaction against cinematic tradition manifested itself largely as hostile to traditional

Christianity. In 1962, Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Ugo Gregoretti contributed short films to a work released as *ROGOPAG* or *Brain Wash*. Pasolini's segment, *La Ricotta*, attempted to show the contrast between the solemn filming of a Passion Play and the obnoxious behavior of the actors between scenes. In my opinion, this work offered a healthy critique of an abuse of Christianity rather than a judgment of its substance.

Buñuel's surrealistic *La Voie Lactée (The Milky Way)*, from 1969, had the same goal. The film generally lampooned violent disagreements within Church history, while affirming healthy spirituality in some key scenes. In one, a scientist proclaimed his fear of technology to be worse than an "absurd faith in God." In another, a heretic was deeply moved and converted after seeing the Virgin Mary perched in a tree. Edith Scob played the Virgin Mary, dressed identically in this apparition scene as she was in the tongue-in-cheek segments depicting the historical life of Jesus.

The Hays code disappeared with cultural changes of the 1960s, and the industry was free to experiment with a variety of themes without interference. Studios produced some substantial commercial films which showed the life of Jesus. *Ben Hur*, which won eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture of 1959, contained some brief scenes of Jesus' birth and the visit of the Magi. Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) included an orchestrated score and a large cast, with Siobhán McKenna as the mother of Jesus. However, its artistic style resembled the popular piety of the nineteenth century as seen in statues and holy cards. Similar to Ray's work in style, though more solemn, was *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), with Dorothy McGuire cast as the Virgin Mary. Adapted from the well-known book by Fulton Oursler and directed by Oscar award-winner George Stevens, this Hollywood spectacular was unexceptional and not well received; both of these last-mentioned movies have been largely forgotten.

From a different quarter, it is worth noting that Pier Paolo Pasolini brought us *The Gospel according to Matthew* in 1964. Filmed to resemble Italian Neo-Realism and also recalling early silent films with some tableaux-style scenes, it was innovative

in style and content and is considered by many critics to be among the best "Life of Christ" films ever made. Pasolini's film, though limited to biblical source material from Matthew, included a good bit of Marian content, from the opening scene in which young Mary, played by Margherita Caruso, appeared silent and pregnant before Joseph who departed disturbed. The film showed the angel's announcement to Joseph, the birth of Jesus, the flight into Egypt, and the massacre of the innocents; it then proceeded to the adult life of Jesus. Here, the director's mother, Susanna, played an older Mary in the presentations showing the "mothers and brothers" pericope and the Crucifixion.

These prominent films, offered within the mainstream of the film industry in the 1960s, might have been seen as signs of a Christian revival in cinema and elsewhere. Such hopes were misplaced. For a variety of reasons, interest in Mary waned after the 1950s, and she appeared much less frequently in films, or most anywhere else, in the decade following Vatican Council II. However, a religious and Marian revival were merely delayed rather than denied. In 1976, Franco Zeffirelli's miniseries, *Jesus of Nazareth*, was broadcast on television in the United States. It is among the best films in the "Life of Christ" genre and provides excellent Marian content in terms of quality and quantity. Olivia Hussey played Our Lady and appeared for about two of the film's six-hour length. Opening with the marriage of Mary and Joseph, the film moved quickly to a well-crafted portrayal of the Annunciation. Saint Ann was shown outside of Mary's room, while Gabriel was suggested only by light streaming in through Mary's window. The actual birth of Jesus shortly afterward was not shown, but Mary's apparent discomfort suggested labor pains. Zeffirelli is the first director, to my knowledge, to suggest this explicitly, a point worth noting because of Catholic teaching on Mary's *in partu* virginity. As in the Bible, Mary appeared sparingly during the adult life of Jesus. Of course, she was shown at Calvary with John and Mary Magdalene as Scripture relates.

To this point, Mary's life has been presented (with one exception) through her role as a supporting character within a story about the life of her son, Jesus. The lone exception was

Mater Dei, directed by Dom Emilio Cordero in 1950 for the Society of Saint Paul. This film drew on Apocrypha to supplement Scripture, and imaged Mary from a posture of isolated grandeur resembling a goddess. Returning now to discuss the period after Zeffirelli's masterpiece, we see something new, a series of films in which Mary appears as a main character in the story, or even the main character. I choose to call these "Life of Mary" films as a complement to "Life of Christ" films and believe that these signify the religious and Marian revival in the film industry that was prematurely anticipated among the many social changes of the 1960s.

The Nativity, directed by Bernard Kowalski, aired on U.S. television in 1978 with Madeline Stowe playing Jesus' mother. Since the film ended with the Savior's birth, Mary was free to occupy center stage. The character development and interaction were exceptional in this work which was also innovative and creative in certain other respects. For example, at the Annunciation, the angel was neither seen nor heard. The audience heard only Mary's part of the conversation, though Gabriel's presence was suggested by a strange reflection of sunlight on the water as she approached from the shore. This could have been an allusion to the virginal conception of the Vestal Virgin Rhea Sylvia, as told in the classical myth about her seduction by the god Mars and the conception of Romulus and Remus.

Eric Till brought *Mary and Joseph: A Story of Faith* to American television in 1979. Blanche Baker played Mary beside Jeff East as Joseph. The couple played their roles much like American teenagers, and the film has largely been forgotten. These films seem to have formed the vanguard of a religious and Marian revival in films. In 1987, *Miriam of Nazareth* was directed by Vincenzo Labella. Franco Rossi directed *A Child Called Jesus*, shown on American television in 1989. The film was very disappointing; more of the material was original fiction rather than Scripture-based.

In 1992, Rosa Perahim filmed *Marie* during the performance of a play written by Daniel Facerias and staged at Lourdes. The opening scene told of Anna's miraculous conception of Mary, with a reference to her previous barrenness. The story then

presented the presentation of Mary, the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the birth of Jesus; the wedding at Cana, Jesus leaving Mary to begin his mission; Mary with the women disciples; Mary at the Cross, at Pentecost, in Ephesus, and, finally, her Assumption. Barbara d'Alcantara played the Virgin Mary.

Well-known French director Jean Delannoy offered *Marie de Nazareth* in 1993, a major production shown on the Lifetime cable channel in the USA. Myriam Muller played Mary as a young girl and also in the scenes showing Jesus' adult life. In these later scenes, Mary was shown in an innovative way, taking a leadership position with the women who followed Jesus which paralleled his role with the Apostles. This same year, Giovanni Veronessi's *Per Amore solo per Amore* was released in Italy, based on the award-winning 1983 novel by Pasquale Festa Campanille. Diego Abantuono played Joseph. Penelope Cruz played Mary, while Eliana Giua played young Mary.

Our story has now reached the end of the twentieth century, and very nearly the end of the first century of the life of Mary as dramatized in film as well. Two notable "Life of Mary" films were released in 1999. *Mary, Mother of Jesus*, directed by Kevin Connor, aired on NBC in 1999. Melinda Kinnaman played young Mary, while Pernilla August played Mary for Jesus' later years. The film has been criticized by some as being overly politically correct, but there are also some theological concerns. It shows Jesus learning some of his basic religious teachings from his mother, a development not presented in the Bible, and perhaps opposed to passages like Luke 2:41-52 and John 8:26-27.

At the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the third Christian millennium, December 1999 saw the release of Fabrizio Costa's *Maria, Figlia del suo Figlio* on Italian television. Lux Vide, the Italian Catholic studio associated with the Society of Saint Paul, was involved in the production and distribution of this film. Like *Mater Dei* (1950), which was also a Society of Saint Paul production, Costa's work presented apocryphal as well as biblical material. For example, the film opened with Mary at Calvary, then presented a flashback to her own presentation in the Temple as a young child. A tasteful and appealing scene, based on Catholic doctrine rather than

Scripture, showed Mary and Joseph committing to a virginal marriage out of devotion to Jesus.

As the timeline of this century of Marian films has reached its end, it is opportune to express a few summary conclusions. Seventy-five films portrayed the earthly life of Mary, usually presenting her as a supporting character in films about the earthly life of Jesus. The vast majority of these films closely followed the biblical accounts, showing Mary primarily in the context of the infancy of Jesus or of his death.

Ten films, denoted as "Life of Mary" films, presented Mary as the principal protagonist. Out of dramatic necessity, these tales added material not explicitly found in Scripture's few references to the Virgin of Nazareth. Linking the New Wave approaches was negation of established norms without promotion of new ideals. Since no alternative vision of Mary was consistently offered, people eventually reclaimed the old one. The first "Life of Mary" film from the Society of Saint Paul in 1950 (*Mater Dei*) was similar in many ways to the one with which they closed the twentieth century (*Maria, Figlia del suo Figlio*).

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