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THE LIFE OF MARY IN FILM

Marian Film in the Twenty-First Century

Catherine M. O'Brien, Ph.D.*

The twenty-first century is already proving to be a fruitful period for feature films with Marian content, with notable releases in the United States, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Strikingly, the productions range from million-dollar studio projects to low-budget independent enterprises, demonstrating a renewed interest in sacred themes that has been awoken by market forces as well as artistic ambition.

Interfaith dialogue

While the majority of cinematic Marian narratives are reflections on the New Testament, one conspicuous exception is an Iranian feature entitled *The Saint Mary/Maryam Moghaddas* (Shahriar Bohrani, 2001, Iran) that charts Mary's life as recounted in the Koran. Although Muslims honor Mary as the mother of a holy prophet rather than of the Second Person of the Trinity, there are key scenes, such as the Annunciation, that a Catholic audience would find both markedly familiar and patently distinctive. In *The Saint Mary*, a voice-over narrator reads aloud the dialogue of Mary and Gabriel, generating a distancing effect that reduces the impression of a personal encounter. While the angelic message echoes the Lukan passage in the New Testament, Mary's crucial biblical verse (Luke 1:38) is not part of the Koranic text and there is no direct

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reference to her *fiat*. When Pope Benedict XVI visited the Annunciation Basilica in Nazareth in May 2009, he said in his address:

Mary stands in the place of all humanity. She speaks for us all when she responds to the angel's invitation. Saint Bernard describes how the whole court of heaven was waiting with eager anticipation for her word of consent that consummated the nuptial union between God and humanity. The attention of all the choirs of angels was riveted on this spot, where a dialogue took place that would launch a new and definitive chapter in world history.¹

In contrast, Mary is commanded (not invited) to play a role in God's plan of Salvation in *The Saint Mary*, and the angel turns away before she has an opportunity to react. Rather than verbally acknowledging the tidings, Mary faints—her physical response underlining the omnipotence of God as understood in the Koran: "God creates whom He will. When He decrees a thing He need only say 'Be,' and it is."² However, despite the crucial differences in Catholic and Muslim understanding of Mary's role, Bohrani's presentation of his titular protagonist (Shabnam Gholikhani) as a woman of great holiness, courage and powerful intercession has potential for essential interfaith dialogue. The production has been warmly received in a variety of countries, including Russia, England, the United States, France, Switzerland and Zimbabwe.

Faithful or free?

The filmmaker who desires to create an original work of art must weigh the importance of *Sola Scriptura* against the creative language of cinema. Lance Tracy's twenty-minute narrative entitled *The Cross* (2001, US) is shot predominantly,

¹ "Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI," Upper Basilica of the Annunciation—Nazareth, Thursday, 14 May 2009. Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090514_vespri-nazareth_en.html (accessed 16 May 2009).

² *The Koran*, translated with notes by N. J. Darwood (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 47.

although not exclusively, from Jesus' perspective, so that Mary (Jenny Gago) is captured in point-of-view shots on the Via Dolorosa, at Calvary and in a flashback to the Finding in the Temple. Tracy has spoken of the dilemmas facing the director of a religious film: "Unfortunately, it is difficult to put our sometimes cinematically-cumbersome religious beliefs and viewpoints aside to take the artistic license to tell the best story. . . . You don't find those same constraints in a non-religious historical film. There are expectations to contend with, and a Christian audience goes into a film like this with their own set of them."³

One extreme response to the "faithfulness to Scripture" dilemma is found in *The Gospel of John* (2003, US), directed by Philip Saville for the Visual Bible series. As a word-for-word transposition from page to screen of *The Good News Bible*, the film promotes a literal translation at the expense of a screenwriter's traditional concern for "plot points." Mary appears at the wedding at Cana and at the Crucifixion and there is no invented dialogue to develop her role. Nevertheless, as the adjective *visual* indicates, artistic decisions need to be taken with regard to the choice of actress (here played by Diana Berriman) and the *mise-en-scène*. As film pioneer D. W. Griffith claimed: "The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see."⁴

Given the visual medium, the interest for film and theology students might reside in an analysis of Mary's facial expression as she hears the words of Jesus ("Madam, what do you have to do with this?") in the Wedding at Cana scene (John 2:1-12). It is also significant that Saville's Cana sequence ends with a shot of Mary (rather than of Jesus himself) which underlines her importance in the miracle. Therefore, it is notable that Saville uses "the camera to tell one story while the narrator of the Gospel of John tells another."⁵ The Evangelist does not

³ See the interview with Matt Page, 19 February 2007. Available on-line at: <http://biblefilms.blogspot.com/search?q=lance+tracy> (accessed 2 February 2009).

⁴ Quoted in Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 4.

⁵ Jo-Ann A. Brant, "Camera as Character in Phillip Saville's *The Gospel of John*," in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 149-164, 164.

describe whether Mary stands upright or faints into the arms of the beloved disciple as Jesus is crucified, but the choice of direction and the outer manifestation of Mary's spiritual response significantly affect the audience's understanding of her role at Calvary. For example, in contrast to Mary's quiet dignity in Saville's film, the actress (Debbi Morgan) playing Mary in Jean Claude La Marre's independent production *Color of the Cross* (2006, US) sobs and keens in a manner that underlines the horror of the act of execution without conveying the meaning (or her own understanding) of Jesus' sacrifice.

Additional concerns come to the fore when the narrative is embellished with extra-biblical dialogue. Frank Deasy, who wrote the screenplay for the BBC *Passion* (Michael Offer, 2008, UK), spoke of his desire "to get away from the traditional depiction of this very long-suffering, adoring figure" in the background and to present Mary as "a very real woman, and a very strong, powerful woman."⁶ However, one of the most controversial lines in *The Passion* occurs in an invented scene between Mary (Penelope Wilton) and the adult Jesus, in which Mary claims, "I never asked for you. You were in my belly before I knew," thereby negating the Annunciation or any consideration of Mary's autonomous role in the plan of Salvation.

The Time Life *Close to Jesus* series relies predominantly on the screenwriter's imagination to develop material around New Testament figures. Raffaele Mertes' film *Joseph of Nazareth/Giuseppe di Nazareth* (2001, Italy) expands Joseph's role by endowing him with exceptional carpentry skills and a number of rebellious nephews that place him in the center of the frame when Mary (Stefania Rivi) is absent.⁷ In comparison, the low-budget enterprise *Birdsong/El cant des ocells* (Albert Serra, 2008, Spain) uses black and white visuals and minimal speech to relate the journey of the Magi across barren terrain until the kings finally pay homage to Jesus. In the stark film's

⁶ Interview with Frank Deasy, DVD extras, *The Passion* (Michael Offer, 2008, UK): Acorn Media.

⁷ Mertes also directed two other films in the *Close to Jesus* series in which Mary (played by Enrica Maria Modugno) plays a minor role: *Thomas/Gli amici di Gesù—Tommaso* (2001, Italy); and *Judas/Gli amici di Gesù - Giuda* (2001, Italy).

most reverent scene, the men lie prostrate at the feet of Mary (Montse Triola) as she cradles her child outside a dilapidated, isolated cottage.

The dangers of invented Marian dialogue are avoided altogether as Mary (Maria Pia Calzone) figures as a silent witness in *The Final Inquiry/L'inchiesta* (Giulio Base, 2006, Italy/Spain/USA/Bulgaria), which centers on the efforts of Titus Valerius Taurus, a Roman soldier, to investigate the life and death of Jesus in the period immediately following the Crucifixion. Mary does not utter a single word but figures as a physical presence on three occasions: at a flashback to Calvary when she faints; kneeling by the empty cross (which remains as a relic along with the INRI sign); and, finally, when she leads Titus Valerius to the apostle Peter. The absence of direct speech avoids one potential pitfall, while the invented scenes (such as Mary's decision to return to the empty cross to pray with other female followers after the Resurrection) raise their own theological issues.

The Gibson effect

The landscape of Christian filmmaking changed dramatically in 2004 as a result of the acclaim and unexpected monetary rewards garnered by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, US)—a film described by American preacher Billy Graham as “a lifetime of sermons in one movie.”⁸ Given its explicit Marian dimension, there was some surprise that Gibson's film was so enthusiastically welcomed by many Evangelicals: Mary's role is central to the narrative and the Good Friday events are frequently viewed through her eyes. Played by the Jewish actress Maia Morgenstern (offering a contrast to the traditional casting of a Gentile actress, and a mitigating factor for critics who have rejected the film as anti-Semitic), Mary's representation remains very “Catholic,” for Gibson draws on The Stations of the Cross as well as the visions of Saint Bridget of Sweden, the seventeenth-century Spanish nun Venerable Mary of Agreda, and the nineteenth-century mystic Blessed

⁸ Quoted in Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of the Passion of the Christ* (New York: Alba House, 2005), xxiii.

Anne Catherine Emmerich. While such an approach angered some Protestant commentators such as Matt Trewhella, who complained that "[t]he film is wrought with an unbiblical fixation on Mary" who is presented "as the co-redemptress,"⁹ David Neff argued in *Christianity Today* that "the theology of the film articulates very powerful themes that have been important to all classical Christians."¹⁰

Mary becomes a conduit through which the audience forms its own response to the action on screen, and the suffering of Jesus is reflected on her face. The flashback scenes to the home life of Jesus (including the Tall Table episode, which was created in Gibson's imagination) serve to develop a very human, sympathetic relationship between Mary and her son, as well as providing a moment of respite for an audience subjected to the sequences featuring the ongoing torture of Jesus.

In a review of biblical films at Easter 2009, the American film critic Ted Baehr, founder of *Movieguide*, warmly praises *The Passion of the Christ* as "an artistic masterpiece" without making any direct reference to Mary's role,¹¹ perhaps in keeping with the response of Biblical scholar Darrell Bock that Evangelicals "gave Mel a pass on the Mary perspective."¹² In his introduction to *The Bible on the Big Screen*, J. Stephen Lang remarks on Mary's substantial role in the film but admits that "as an evangelical myself, I did not find that offensive, since love for one's son is not something specifically Catholic."¹³

New perspectives and old dilemmas

The release of *The Passion of the Christ* had more than a theological and ecumenical impact. The tectonic plates shifted

⁹ Matt Trewhella, "The Passion of the Christ or the Emperor's New Clothes," 24 February 2004. On-line. Available: <http://www.theflamingtonorch.org/archives/2004/THE-EMPEROR-NEW-CLOTHES.htm> (accessed 3 March 2009).

¹⁰ Quoted in Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of the Passion of the Christ*, 137.

¹¹ Ted Baehr, "Jesus Christ in the Movies," 9 April 2009. On-line. Available: <http://www.movieguide.org/articles/main/jesus-christ-in-the-movies.html> (accessed 17 April 2009).

¹² Quoted in Deborah Caldwell, "Selling Passion," in *Perspectives on the Passion of the Christ* (New York: Miramax Books/Hyperion, 2004), 211-24, 218.

¹³ J. Stephen Lang, *The Bible on the Big Screen: A Guide from Silent Films to Today's Movies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 16.

as the Hollywood studios hurried to cater for a re-discovered Christian audience that had bought tickets for a New Testament film in Latin and Aramaic; and *The New York Times* proclaimed that Hollywood had "seen the light and it is green," arguing that work began on the New Line film *The Nativity Story* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2006, US) at "warp speed" in order to capitalize on fresh Christian enthusiasm for cinema-going.¹⁴ However, Gibson's film had been carefully marketed and promoted to American churches before its release (generating anticipation and discussion via pre-screenings) in a way that Catherine Hardwicke's film of the birth of Jesus failed to emulate. Despite a positive endorsement by the Vatican, which allowed the première of *The Nativity Story* to take place in the Paul VI Hall in Vatican City in November 2006, Hardwicke's film made \$46 million worldwide on a budget of \$35 million, which was disappointing by comparison with over \$600 million earned by *The Passion of the Christ*.

The set designers and consultants working on *The Nativity Story* located the narrative within its historical time frame, with great care being taken over the accuracy of the *mise-en-scène* and the actions of the protagonists (for example, Keisha Castle-Hughes, who played Mary, learned how to milk a goat and grind flour).¹⁵ But the director, Catherine Hardwicke, was already known for making films about young people (such as *Thirteen* (2003, US), *Lords of Dogtown* (2005, US/Germany) and, subsequently, the teenage vampire film *Twilight* (2008, US)), and she explained her approach in interviews: 'I think at the very beginning when I first read the script—Mike [Rich] wrote a beautiful script—but in the very first scene Mary was extremely holy, pious, and the perfect saint, even in the first scene. I thought, well, not that she

¹⁴ Sharon Waxman, "Holiday Movies: They Have Seen the Light, and It Is Green," 5 November 2006. On-line. Available: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9801E0D7123FF936A35752C1A9609C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2> (accessed 17 April 2009).

¹⁵ See Cristy Lytal, "Q and A: Catherine Hardwicke," 2006. On-line. Available: <http://web5.premiere.com/directors/3300/q-a-catherine-hardwicke.html> (accessed 17 April 2009).

shouldn't be a wonderful person, but she was a kid too, you know?"¹⁶

While a number of Catholic commentators were unhappy with this vision of Mary as "the most famous teenager in the world,"¹⁷ the film was also criticized in some quarters for its "Protestant" portrayal of Mary as a young girl from Nazareth without specific reference to the privileges of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and her *in partu* virginity.¹⁸ However, Ted Baehr, who is scathing of "the slightly politically correct role" of Mary in Kevin Connor's *Mary, mother of Jesus* (1999, US), is most enthusiastic about Hardwicke's film: "There is one moment where Mary has an attitude, but it is very brief and natural. A later statement, however, declares that Mary is always trustworthy, that she keeps her promises and therefore she is honored by God. Her complexities add depth to her character and make the story of Mary and Joseph more profound."¹⁹

Despite some criticisms of Hardwicke's stance, her approach reveals the desire to show that the New Testament narrative has a significance that crosses time lines and historical and cultural specificity. In the same year that *The Nativity Story* was released, there were two other directors who struggled to transfer their own vision of the New Testament onto celluloid without the benefits of major Hollywood finance. Interestingly, these two filmmakers, Jean Claude La Marre and Mark Dornford-May, both feature a black Jesus and, therefore, a black Madonna in their independent productions.

La Marre's *Color of the Cross* (2006, US) retains the first-century time frame and diegetic Palestinian location (although

¹⁶ See Rebecca Murray, "Director Catherine Hardwicke Talks about *The Nativity Story*," 2006. On-line. Available: <http://movies.about.com/od/thenativitystory/a/nativitych1106.html> (accessed 17 April 2009).

¹⁷ Gill Pringle, "There's Something about Mary," 1 December 2006. On-line. Available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/tthe-nativity-story-theres-something-about-mary-426445.html> (accessed 29 April 2009).

¹⁸ For further comment see Johann Roten, "The Never-ending Challenge of Religious Films," 2007. On-line. Available: <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/religiousfilms.html> (Accessed 4 May 2009).

¹⁹ Ted Baehr, "Jesus Christ in the Movies" (see n. 11 on page 292).

the film itself is shot in California), with the director taking the role of Jesus himself and adopting a Protestant approach to the Holy Family, as Mary and Joseph clearly have other children. Dornford-May's *Son of Man* (2006, South Africa) is an example of cultural transposition, transferring the story to a fictional Kingdom of Judea in contemporary Africa. Mary is presented as a black African woman, giving birth in poverty and later courageously facing up to the military authorities when her adult son is arrested and disappears. Within the wartime environment, the sound of gunfire in the background adds an extra dimension to Mary's singing of *The Magnificat*, especially given the status of the canticle within Liberation Theology. While there is stress on the political climate (with the use of the Xhosa language of the people contrasting with the English spoken by the military government), Jesus is not simply a pacifist spokesperson in an age of violence. The spiritual dimension is maintained through the regular appearance of angels (often played by young children wearing white loin cloths and feathers) and the miracles performed by Jesus, which include the raising of one man from the dead.

Jaroslav Pelikan has argued that Mary is "a special ambassador to that vast majority of the human race who [are] not white,"²⁰ and Dornford-May's film celebrates this aspect of Marian devotion. The film ends with a quotation from the Book of Genesis: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,'" and photographs of black African people accompany the credits.

The future?

There are a number of projects currently in development, including a word-for-word version of *The Gospel according to John* (based on The New International Translation) by Bruce Marchiano, who played the role of Jesus in *The Gospel according to Matthew* in the 1990s. However, of most interest to Marian scholars is the proposed production entitled *Mary Mother of Christ*, scripted by Barbara Nicolosi and Benedict

²⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 26.

Fitzgerald, and to be directed by James Foley. The film has been discussed for several years, with a release date originally set for 2008, and the length of time that it takes to bring such a project to fruition is a reminder that cinema is both an art and an industry. Creative inspiration is often stymied by issues of finance. When theology intersects with secular culture, bringing Mary's life to the screen is never simply a labor of love.

The young woman selected for the role of Mary in this new production is named Camilla Belle (b.1986), a choice that has caused the same questions to be asked that have troubled casting directors since the birth of cinema: which actress is suitable to play the mother of Jesus? Penelope Wilton, the English actress in the BBC *Passion*, said, "Quite apart from the emotion of the role, it's challenging because . . . everyone has their idea of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the Virgin Mary, so you're going to disappoint 99.9% of the audience before you start."²¹ Consequently, there may be much to look forward to (or to find fault with) in the following decade, as directors strive to develop a filmic Marian narrative that will satisfy contemporary secular audiences as well as Marian theologians.

²¹ Interview with Penelope Wilton, DVD extras, *The Passion* (Michael Offer, 2008, UK): Acorn Media.