



SCREEN

The Virgin and the Paparazzo

by Sam Karnick

Hail Mary; Directed by Jean-Luc Godard: A Gaumont/New Yorker Films release.

The battle lines are drawn. On one side, Pope John Paul II and the French National Federation of Catholic Family Relations, along with numerous religious groups in this country. On the other, the American media, including *New York* magazine, the *New York Times*, Gannett newspapers, and many, many more.

The issue: Abortion? Nuclear weapons? Return to the Latin Mass? Liberation theology? Not this time. This time the fuss is about a *movie*, specifically *Hail Mary*, the latest offering from Jean-Luc Godard, a French filmmaker born in Switzerland 50 years ago. Godard was a member of the French "New Wave" film group in the late 50's and early 60's and since then has dabbled in Maoism, video, and, most recently, what he calls (in English) a "move" toward religion. He is certainly no stranger to controversy, and his latest film has stirred up a row which has forced religious figures to disport themselves as film critics and film critics to pretend to extraordinary sophistication as theologians.

As *Hail Mary* has made its way across America in the leisurely city-by-city pace typical of foreign films, American clergy, especially Catholic clergy, have been hard-pressed to decide whether to condemn it outright or to ignore it like Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago and organize prayer meetings in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Film critics, for their part, have been equally divided. Some have simply defended it on First Amendment

grounds, while others have attempted to characterize the film as not only not irreligious but in fact a deeply religious film. In fact, says *New York* magazine's David Denby, *Hail Mary* is "one of the most tenderly religious movies ever made." Roger Ebert, speaking "as a Catholic" on TV's *At the Movies*, concurs.

Well, which is it? Foul blasphemy or deeply religious testament? As might be expected, it is neither. What it is is a heartfelt but deeply misguided attempt to make the story of the Immaculate Conception accessible to the modern mind.

Hail Mary is a perfect incarnation of the 20th century's characteristic disease: scientism, the discomfort with the unexplained, the mysterious, and the spiritual side of life. Perhaps the story of the Immaculate Conception is inaccessible to the modern mind. It would certainly seem so. But the problem is with the modern mind, not with the mysteries of creation. Godard's failing is that he has pitched his story toward the modern mind; it is a noble attempt that was doomed from the start.

It is not, of course, the story being told which has caused all the trouble, but rather the technique used in the telling. The aim of the film is always to demystify the story, to make it seem possible, to make everything more plausible to the earthbound 20th-century mind. The director has been remarkably single-minded in his narrative technique. He takes special pains to demystify Mary herself. (It is this element which has probably contributed most to making the film so offensive to Catholics.) Godard shows Mary playing basketball, working in her father's gas station, swearing, smoking cigarettes, using bright red lipstick, writhing in pain on her bed, and arguing with her boyfriend. Mary also spends much of the film in varying degrees of undress, although in the director's defense the nudity does not

appear salacious.

Still, it seems quite unnecessary to include so much nudity and pain, however well-intentioned. We get the point: She's just your average, everyday teenage girl chosen by God to bear his only Son. Furthermore, there is one scene in which Mary swears furiously at God, accuses him of "using" her, and blasphemes angrily. The scene is passionate, dramatic, compelling, and terribly offensive. Worse yet, it doesn't ring true. Godard's Mary may be human, but it seems quite unlikely that the pain of her pregnancy and the terrible responsibility thrust upon her were not tempered by a sense of joy at the prospect of having a child and a sense of exaltation at being chosen to bear God's only Son. Whatever credibility the film has had among Christians up to this point dissipates completely.

The same single-mindedness applies to the treatment of the other characters. The director portrays Joseph as the quintessential cuckold. Joseph is at first understandably skeptical of Mary's claim, but soon becomes crazed with jealousy. He is faithful to her, and while he tries to convince Mary to go to bed with him, he doesn't try too hard, and eventually settles for just seeing her naked. A very tender relationship it is. But he also initiates vicious shouting matches and generally makes an ass of himself. It is not, all in all, a very flattering portrait.

Nor is the picture of the angel Gabriel. Gabriel wears sunglasses, dresses like a hipster and acts like a caricature of Belmondo—alternately tough and sensual. He also travels with a little girl who cues him when he forgets his lines. In addition to all this, there is a subplot in which a lecherous academic attempts to seduce Eve (yes, *that* Eve). The film is intended as a serious comedy, but the characters are too one-dimensional to be taken seriously.

Still, although much of the film is simple-minded and childish, there are

elements of considerable power and insight to go along with the often-sophomoric humor. The film's exploration of the conflict between science and nature, logic and intuition, and knowledge and faith occasionally works: the shot of a tiny, distant airplane crossing the sun does succeed in evoking conception, man's conquest of the material world and his scientific triumphs, and the tininess of man's accomplishments (the plane) compared to the vastness of creation (the sun). In addition, the film's themes are synthesized remarkably well in the scenes involving Eve and the professor. The professor (for short, we'll call him "Satan") seduces Eve with knowledge: the "facts" about the origin of life on Earth, and consequently the true nature of man. Satan tells Eve that life was implanted on Earth from elsewhere in the Universe (Heaven?). "If you want to see an extraterrestrial," he says, "look in a mirror." His scientific explanations and animal charm win her over. But what has she gained? Knowledge. And what has she lost? Faith. It is a very successful translation of The Fall.

The relationship between Joseph and Mary also provides a nice moment of epiphany. Joseph, upset over the realization that he will forever be a footnote to his wife's story, says, "I'm

going to be your shadow." To which Mary replies, "God's shadow: Isn't that what all men are?" All the themes of the film conjoin in that one image: that no man can bring life into the world, that God's Son was born of a human mother, and that all men are subjects of God. A director who could create such a moment surely couldn't have intended such blasphemies as are found elsewhere in the film, could he?

I don't think he could, and I don't think he did. In all the controversy over this film, one thing which has been forgotten is that there is a difference between depicting blasphemies and condoning them. Nobody complained when the Jews in DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* were shown building the golden ass, because the director clearly didn't condone the behavior. Similarly, while there is no indication in the Bible that Mary ever blasphemed against God, clearly Godard does not intend her blasphemies to be attributed to him as his own feelings. The scene is a mistake, and perhaps even an insult, but clearly not intended as blasphemy. Still, it is easy to see how viewers of the film, especially Catholics, with their great devotion to the image of the Virgin, might view the film as blasphemous.

In the end, both sides are right. *Hail Mary* is a deeply religious film, and it is also a vulgar, insulting sacrilege. It all depends on how you look at it. And that, after all, is the director's ultimate failure: that what was intended as a sincerely religious film could be plausibly interpreted as a scurrilously irrereligious film. If Godard has not sinned in thought, he certainly has in word and deed.

Sam Karnick is a screenwriter who lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

ART

Without a Barrel

by Caroline Morgan

Thundering through the Falls of Niagara is the overflow of all the Great Lakes except Lake Ontario. The combined waterpower of Horseshoe Falls and American Falls has been estimated at some four million horsepower. Both



"Niagara Falls (from above)"
Watercolor on paper by Thomas Davies. At The New York Historical Society. January 22-April 27, 1986.

Falls drop more than 150 feet; their combined width is nearly four-fifths of a mile.

Even Oscar Wilde, like Sarah Bernhardt before him, was persuaded to put on an ungainly waterproof coat before strolling in the spray of these awesome waters. Thousands of other tourists arrived at the Falls in the 19th century. Henry James (no common tourist he) complained of the "horribly vulgar shops and booths and catchpenny artifices which have pushed and elbowed to within the very spray of the Falls."

Among these tourists appeared the painters, engravers, and photographers whose work graced The New York Historical Society this winter in "Niagara: Two Centuries of Changing Attitudes, 1697-1901." The catalog of the show reads like a "Who's Who" of the Hudson River School of landscape paintings.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, organized the exhibition to celebrate the centenary of the Niagara Reservation, the oldest state park in America. The Corcoran's painting of the Falls by Frederic Edwin Church was the centerpiece of the show.

Like most of the representation of Niagara Falls in the exhibition, Church's work captures the aesthetic splendor but not the transcendent terror of the experience of Niagara. These artists have tamed Niagara as a symbol of power, just as modern technology has regulated the actual flow of the Niagara River. Only John Trumbull's eerie double panoramas of the Falls comes close to translating the spiritual significance of Niagara.

What we have forgotten is the way

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