Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 15
Issue 1 *April 2011*

Article 7

4-1-2011

Screening the Silly: The Christian Iconography of Roberto Rossellini's Francesco, giullare di Dio

Peter L. Doebler
Graduate Theological Union, pdoebler@ses.gtu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation
Doebler, Peter L. (2011) "Screening the Silly: The Christian Iconography of Roberto Rossellini's Francesco, giullare di Dio," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 7.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.15.01.07
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol15/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Screening the Silly: The Christian Iconography of Roberto Rossellini's Francesco, giullare di Dio

Abstract

This paper examines the image of St. Francis created by Roberto Rossellini in his film *Francesco, giullare di Dio* by comparing and contrasting it to the traditional iconography of the saint. It progresses through three parts: 1) a brief overview of the emergence of the traditional iconography of St. Francis; 2) an in-depth discussion of Rossellini's film, beginning with the director's comments on the film followed by a structural breakdown of the film itself and its film style; and 3) a comparison of the findings in the second part with the first part.

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol15/iss1/7

Introduction

Images of St. Francis of Assisi are some of the most popular in all of Christian iconography, a testament to the power of the povarello's character and vision. Like Mother Theresa, his self-inflicted poverty and care for outcasts makes him naturally respectable but add to this the miracles associated with him, particularly the stigmata, marking him as especially holy, along with a penchant for talking to animals and shaking hands with wolves and you have a fascinating figure indeed.

In the history of film iconography depictions of Francis have not been as common, compared to say Joan of Arc, but one film of the saint's life does stand out, Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco, giullare di Dio* ("*Francis, God's jester*," *The Flowers of St. Francis* in its English release). It is especially notable because it seems to hardly be about Francis, if it is about anything. In subject matter alone the film is worth comparing with previous iconography of St. Francis, but for this derivation from traditional expectations it especially warrants investigation.

The purpose of this paper is to compare Rossellini's film to the traditional iconography of St. Francis. It will be accomplished in three stages: 1) a brief overview of the emergence of the traditional iconography along with the usual motifs depicted as well as the attributes assigned to Francis; 2) an in-depth

discussion of Rossellini's film beginning with the director's comments on the film followed by a structural breakdown of the film itself and its film style; and 3) a comparison of the traditional static iconography with Rossellini's film version.

Traditional Iconography of St. Francis

In spreading the message and memory of St. Francis, imagery was indispensable, developing along with the written and spoken words leading to his canonization and codified first in Tommaso de Celano's Vita Prima (c.1230) and Vita Secunda (c.1247) biographies and ultimately in the Legenda Major and Minor of St. Bonaventure (c.1263–6) but elaborated in amusing ways by the Fioretti (Little Flowers) and other collected stories.

The first image of St. Francis appeared around 1228 in the Sacro Speco in Subiaco. St. Francis does not have a halo or the marks of the stigmata (leading some to date the image to 1218, the date Francis visited the site) and he holds a scroll that reads, "Peace to this house."[1]

The earliest dated image is Bonaventura Berlingheri's St. Francis and Four Scenes From His Legend in Pescia, San Francesco, which dates to 1235. The painting is dominated by a full-length devotional image of St. Francis with the stigmata, a book and the rope belt with three knots for the order's three virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience. The saint is flanked by three images on either side,

four being posthumous miracles the others preaching to the birds and receiving the stigmata, two incidents from the saint's life that would be influential motifs later.

Two other important early images are the Saint Francis and Four Posthumous Miracles by the Mastery of the Treasury (sometimes thought to be Giunta Pisano) in San Francesco and the very similar painting currently in the Vatican. Neither have dates. In the Mastery of the Treasury version, Francis holds a red cross and a book with Matthew 21.19 written on it. It was also revered as a relic, reported to have been painted on the board Francis' corpse was washed on.[2]

So, from the beginning there was a blending of devotional images of the saint mixed with historical narrative images, especially stressing the miracles associated with St. Francis. The magnificent fresco life cycles, the Bardi cycle in Santa Croce in Florence and the St. Francis Master in the Lower Church of San Francesco and the Giotto cycle in the Upper Church, using the resources of Celano and Bonaventure, would extend this historical vein to its furthest point, showing the saint's life from youth to posthumous miracles.

At this point we are able to make some general comments about St. Francis images. His attributes are the stigmata, the brown habit and rope belt with three knots, and often a crucifix, book or lily.[3] In later imagery a skull becomes important.

The images at San Francesco, naturally, present the greatest variety of historical images of St. Francis including giving his coat to a beggar in his youth, the vision in the dilapidated San Damiano where he received a message from the crucified Christ to rebuild the ruined church, the fight with his father at court when he renounces wealth and family ties, going to Pope Innocent III for approval of his order, the vision Innocent III had of Francis holding up the Church, preaching to the birds, meeting with St. Clare, his apparition at Arles, casting out the demons in Arezzo, his challenge to walk through fire before the Sultan in Egypt, the nativity celebration in Greccio where the Christ Child miraculously appeared, receiving the stigmata, his death, as well as posthumous miracles. Also included is an Apotheosis of St. Francis and the mystic Marriage of St. Francis to poverty. While it is a historical life cycle, the miraculous aspect of Francis' life is foregrounded.

Earlier than the San Francesco cycle, the paintings at San Croce present an interesting foil to San Francesco, including images that stress the humility and compassion of Francis, such as him redeeming two lambs that were being taken to slaughter and doing penance.

Later, with the publication of the Little Flowers, other narrative images appeared, particularly the story of the wolf at Grubbio or meeting Lady Poverty on the road (Sassetta).[4] Another historical image that appears is meeting Dominic at the Fourth Lateran Council (Gozzoli).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.15.01.07

So, the tendency in the first centuries after Francis death seems to show the miraculous, unusual and historical in the life of Francis in such as way as to set him apart from the common person, worthy of reverence, yes, but perhaps beyond imitation.[5]

As for the actual physical appearance of Francis that is depicted, we are lucky to have a quite detailed description of him in Celano's Vita Prima:

> He was very eloquent, with a cheerful appearance and a kind face; free of laziness and arrogance. He was of medium height, closer to short, his head was of medium size and round. His face was somewhat long and drawn, his forehead small and smooth, with medium eyes black and clear. His hair was dark; his eyebrows straight, and his nose even and thin; his ears small and upright, and his temples smooth. His tongue was peaceable, fiery and sharp; his voice was powerful, but pleasing, clear, and musical. His teeth were white, well set and even; his lips were small and thin; his beard was black and sparse; his neck was slender, his shoulders straight; his arms were short, his hands slight, his fingers long and his nails tapered. He had thin legs, small feet, fine skin and little flesh. His clothing was rough, his sleep was short, his hand generous.[6]

Regardless of the historical accuracy of the description and despite the diversity of the images of Francis, there is a consistency in mirroring Celano's description, particularly the round head, except surprisingly in the earliest image we posses, that in Sacro Speco.

Moving into the Renaissance, St. Francis appears in his share of altarpieces, notably those by Raphael (Colonna Altarpiece) and Giorgione, and the stigmata remains popular, Bellini's being a masterpiece in the genre.[7] Already at this time

the historical paintings are becoming less frequent apart from the stigmata which is always the most popular motif for Francis iconography. But it is after the Council of Trent that a new iconography of St. Francis appears that emphasized "it was the Saint's mystical and visionary experiences rather than the story of his life that were considered capable of transforming the spectator and that captured the imagination, becoming a focus of devotion."[8] St. Francis in ecstasy of some sort became a popular image and the crucifix remains and a skull appears as an attribute (El Greco, Carravaggio, van Dyck, Zurbaran). Also, angels, often playing music, appear to comfort St. Francis (Ribalta and Ribera). Often St. Francis will appear with a fellow brother who is sleeping (de la Tour). It is possible some of the ecstasy scenes before a crucifix could be read as the vision in San Damiano and the scenes with the brother could be related to the stigmata. Some unusual images of St. Francis also appear such as Simon Vouet's The Temptation of St. Francis.

Paintings of St. Francis, like all religious subjects, have declined in the modern era, but devotional images still appear and, coming full circle, his life cycle has been represented in a beautiful children's book recently.[9]

Roberto Rossellini's Saint Francis

Roberto Rossellini's Francesco, giullare di Dio was premiered in 1950 at the Venice Film Festival, out of competition. It was made during the tempestuous fall-out over

his marriage to Ingrid Bergman, and it was one of the biggest commercial disasters in Italian film history.[10]

It has now obtained a classical status, but even today it doesn't receive much attention and it is easy to see why. For the hard core realist critic, it is a bizarre story that has surreal overtones; for the popular audience it is a loose collection of incidents with no real connecting narrative and played predominately by non-actor Franciscan monks;[11] and for the religious viewer the film is too physical and it actually de-emphasizes the saintly aspect of Francis.[12] But probably the greatest "problem" with the film is that it isn't about St. Francis! As we'll see, the central figure of the film ends up being the most insignificant, the simple Brother Ginepro.

A selection of quotes by Rossellini himself is useful for understanding why he made such a film that could confound almost every type of viewer:

> In The Flowers of St. Francis, I don't deal with either his birth or death, nor do I pretend to offer a complete revelation of the Franciscan message or of its spirit, or to tackle the extraordinarily awesome and complex personality of Francis. Instead, I have wanted to show the effects of it on his followers, among whom, however, I have given particular emphasis to Brother Ginepro and Brother Giovanni, who display in an almost paradoxical way the sense of simplicity, innocence, and delight that emanate from Francis's own spirit.

In short, as the title indicates, my film wants to focus on the merrier aspect of the Fransciscan experience, on the playfulness, the 'perfect delight,' the freedom that the spirit finds in poverty and in an absolute detachment from material things."[13]

This desire to show the joy-thru-foolishness, a mix of play and simplicity in the life of a 12th century monk is essential for Rossellini's final goal, giving a needed message for the possibility of morality in Post-war Europe. "I believe that certain aspects of primitive Franciscanism could best satisfy the deepest aspirations and needs of a humanity that, enslaved by its greed and having totally forgotten the Povarello's lesson, has also lost its joy of life."[14] "It is the theme of this strength, of the enormous strength of innocence that I have wanted to tackle one more time in *The Flowers*. At the same time, it is an attempt at making a historical film but with profoundly real elements, in other words, an attempt to reconstruct life as it very probably, or even certainly, was then. This film was shot in this spirit."[15] In order to make it possible for Francis to speak to today, Rossellini had to make this kind of historical/real film where you know it was the Middle Ages but it feels like it happened yesterday.

Also essential to making the film relevant was downplaying the traditional notions of Francis as the far-removed saint. "What I have tried to do in this film is to show a new side of St. Francis, but not one that lies outside of reality: to show a Saint Francis who is humanly and artistically credible in every sense."[16]

The goal of all this is to achieve a peculiar truth that is only available through humility. For "the truth is something very, very small, very, very humble and that is why it is so difficult to discover it. If you have no humility, how can you

approach the truth?"[17] But it is not simply 'umbleness like a Uriah Heep, but a silly humility that doesn't take itself seriously. This is what Rossellini discovered in *The Little Flowers* and related writings which he then attempted to transfer to film: "Even in the film nothing is invented, everything is in the little legends told by the Franciscans. … They wanted to be silly. St. Francis called himself the jester of God, he wanted to be just very foolish, because through silliness you can find the truth. The real title of the film is God's Jester (Francesco, guillare di Dio)."[18]

This silliness gleaned out of the stories of St. Francis, especially those from another collection, the stories of Brother Juniper (Ginepro) give birth to the episodic nature of the film. The movie has no coherent narrative because the Brothers themselves have no coherent narrative. As André Bazin says, "His little brothers of Saint Francis seem to have no better way of glorifying God than to run races. … The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning."[19] Thus the episodic nature of *The Flowers* fits perfectly with Rossellini's film style. "I've made films in episodes because I feel more at ease like that. It's enabled me to avoid passages which, as I say, are useful in a continuous narrative, but precisely because they are useful rather than decisive, are a burden to me, though I can't explain it. I am only at ease where I can avoid

the logical nexus. Staying within the limits laid down by the story is really what I find most difficult."[20]

It should also be noted that Rossellini collaborated with Frederico Fellini on the film. The two had worked together before but it was on this film that Adriano Apra thinks they were in perfect harmony.[21] Isabella Rossellini agrees, finding the greatness of each, the realism of her father and the surreal/dream/absurd Fellini merging perfectly on this topic: an episodic film about silly monks in the 12th century.[22]

A key contributor to this unusual real/surreal feeling in the film is the use of non-actors, not only the Franciscan monks[23] but also Giovanni who was a local beggar Rossellini had met. "He was a very gentle person, and so old that he didn't understand a thing. At the beginning, I explained to him, 'St. Francis says such and such to you and you reply such and such. All right?' 'Yes, signore.' So he went on a repeated all my instruction. I told him not to say anything but his own lines—he answered that he understood completely and then he went and did the same thing again. I decided it was useless to explain things so I sent him for a long walk while I got the scene ready, and I put him in it without saying a word to him. The scene came out of what he did."[24] Contrasted with this is the very limited use of actors, in particular Aldo Fabrizi whom Rossellini chose specifically for the part of the tyrant Nicolaio.[25] More on this will be discussed below.

Turning to the film itself, it opens with Francis reciting his "Canticle to Brother Sun" over the credits and then a quote of St. Paul appears against a sky background: "God chose the foolish things of this world to humiliate the learned, the weak to humiliate the strong." This will be bookended by the final shots of the film, a montage of clouds in the sky, as if to say the whole we have just witnessed is a simply expression of this comment by Paul.

After the credits, the episodic structure of the film allows it to be easily divided into segments. There are ten "flowers," discreet episodes[26] all clearly marked by an introductory inter-title that literally tells you what you are going to see which, strangely, has the ironic effect of creating expectation, which is for Rossellini the essence of film narrative: "Expectation is what brings things alive, what releases reality, and after all the waiting, brings liberation. … Expectation is the force behind every event in our lives: and this is so for cinema too."[27]

The only episode without an introductory inter-title is the first, which is introduced by a voice-over narrator that tells us the Brothers are returning from Rome having just received permission from Pope Innocent III to preach and then we are told what will happen in that episode: they will find their hut occupied and go to St. Mary of the Angels, the ruined chapel where they will stay for the remainder of the film. This sets the narrative structure for the film, for the beginning and end are arriving to and departing from St. Mary of the Angels, when the

Brothers depart in all directions to preach. The interim episodes which make up the film then are snapshots of the Franciscan order in their nascent stage while they restore/reside at St. Mary's. This further reinforces the theme of simplicity, innocence and joy because it depicts a major religious movement before it has become a major religious movement with all the bureaucracy, corruption, etc., which is exactly what would happen with the Franciscans after Francis' death.

Visually the beginning and end are compared by showing the Brothers walking along a country road. They are contrasted by the weather, the pouring rain and mud in the beginning, the dark world of the Middle Ages these monks are entering as they return from Rome with the Pope's blessing, and the end with the bright sky with billowy clouds, the light of the joy that has been growing through the movie in their life together. Also contrasted is the idea of preaching, for the first episode begins, not with Francis speaking but with a debate among the brothers about how they would preach. The end is a commission by Francis to go preach but now we have a clearer idea of what this message should be, particularly in light of the episodes with Ginepro.

So, the film is laid out in ten episodes and it is worth listing them in outline form along with the approximate time dedicated to each in the film:

Arriving at St. Mary of the Angels. 8 minutes

Ginepro returns to St. Mary's naked. 3.5

Giovanni "the simpleton" joins the Brothers. 10

St. Clare comes to visit. 8.5

Ginepro cuts off a pig's foot. 7

St. Francis encounters a Leper. 5

Ginepro cooks food for two weeks. 4

Ginepro preaches to Tyrant Nicolaio. 20

Francis and Leone discover true happiness. 5.5

The Brothers leave St. Mary of the Angels. 12

The opening episode sets the tone for how Francis will be depicted in the film. As the Brothers enter and walk towards the camera, Rossellini lets Francis go past and he focuses on the Brothers behind him, who are debating how to preach, thus immediately undermining our initial expectation of being introduced immediately to the "hero." But he redirects us to Francis with the Brother who calls out, "But why does everyone follow you?" Then we get our first frontal, "devotional" shot of Francis and he says it is because God couldn't find a worse sinner. He bows his head and this is the first of several times Francis will bow his head/put his head in his hands and cry. It is perhaps the most obvious "spiritual" image and it grates against the rest of the movie at first. But as the film progresses they become less of an eye-sore in as much as we accept the

simplicity/humility/silliness picture offered to us. If we don't, they will always appear cheesy.

Next, after the Brothers have been kicked out of their own hut by a traveler with a donkey, we get the strongest hint at the Francis of the film: he sits in the rain and ruins of St. Mary of the Angels and looks at the Brothers who have given up all and followed him. He commands them to punish him for his arrogance. Thus, what emerges is a picture of Francis as leader, someone who, having discovered the spiritual secret of true happiness (disclosed by him in the penultimate episode) is trying to figure out how to lead those who have followed him. As a result, through most of the film we see Francis only in reflection, in his reaction to the Brothers and those he has attracted such as St. Clare or Giovanni. The film, then, is a portrait not only of individual piety, which is certainly seen in some episodes, but of how true community can be formed and who leads such a community, the very message needed in Post-war Europe. And this is fitting with Rossellini's purposes stated above.

If the opening episode establishes this kind of Francis, as leader of a band of fools, it is immediately reinforced in the next episode when we are introduced to arguably the main character of the film, Brother Ginepro. He returns to St. Mary's in his underwear, having followed the commands of poverty to the letter in giving away the shirt off his back. Francis corrects him and orders him not to give away

his shirt. Here is the leader seeing the need to restrain total anarchy but obviously enjoying the scene in his knowing smile to the other Brothers. This and other scenes of Francis with his "knowing smile" identify him as a controller of chaos. He knows what his movement is doing and he enjoys it but it must be balanced, as is seen in the episode when Ginepro cuts off the pigs foot, again being very literal in his urge to do good, and Francis must pacify the injured swine herder.

Francis' love of the simple is then expanded in the third episode when Giovanni the Simpleton wants to join, a senile old man that swings his stick at everything and merely repeats what others say. Again, Francis is visibly amused in welcoming such a person. It is then within this episode that Francis prays to God and the birds sing around him. This appears at first to be the famous scene of Francis preaching to the birds but instead he actually tells them to be quiet so he can praise God too.

The visit of St. Clare in the fourth episode at first is portrayed in a saintly fashion with them enjoying prayer together but it quickly breaks up into a fiasco with the arrival of Ginepro naked again and Giovanni exploding because they took his cape to cover Ginepro. Later, in the quiet fellowship with the Sisters, it is Ginepro, not Francis, who shares his spiritual experiences of getting rid of the devil. Again, Francis merely reacts to this expression of innocence. At the end of this episode is the second voice-over which hints at the only real "miraculous" event in

the film, the local people thinking St. Mary of the Angels is on fire because of the magnificent glow generated by the love of the Sisters and Brothers.

Next is the hilarious pig's foot episode mentioned and the sixth episode is our closest look at the private life of St. Francis in his encounter with the Leper and the soul of the saint is most clearly expressed.

The seventh episode is again Ginepro, this time cooking enough food for two weeks so he also can go out and preach. Yet again, Francis is amused and allows Ginepro to go preach but he must always begin with, "I talk and talk but accomplish little." This then leads to the eighth episode, clearly the center of the film to which the rest has been preparing by making us thoroughly acquainted with Ginepro.

Looking at the time allocated to each episode, the eighth is the longest by far, accounting for almost one-fifth of the film. When Ginepro enters the tyrant's camp we are shocked by the sudden change of worlds from St. Mary of the Angels where we have been up until now. We are getting our first view of the Franciscan message in the real world (although this was hinted at in the episodes with the traveler with the donkey, the leper and the swine herder). The change of clothes, the heavy barbarian furs and boots, and the noise and violence such as bleeding contests all set up a perfect foil to the Franciscan community.

Ginepro begins his speech as ordered but it amusingly is directed at the group of men in blood competition and they take offence and start to play with him in one of the most incredible displays as little Ginepro becomes a ball and jump rope for a dwarf and he is challenged to prove himself on the gallows.[28] At this point we enter the crux of the film as he prays: "My God, I thank you, because I finally understand that it's not by words but by example that souls are won." He jumps, survives, is condemned to death by Nicolaio as an assassin but the camp priest persuades him to reconsider.

The simple, penitent answers of Ginepro to Nicolaio's questions leads to a personal confrontation in the tyrant's tent, the centerpiece of the film. It is a masterpiece with no dialogue, only the tyrant trying to come to terms with the stupid, innocent fearlessness of the man before him. Here is where the contrast of the non-actor monk with the stylized acting of Aldo Fabrizi comes together in perfect counterpoint. As Isabella Rossellini says, "In comparison to the non-actors you immediately see the intent of an actor."[29] Nicolaio represents all that the Franciscans are rebelling against: strength, violence, control, and above all the artificiality that is taken on by humans as a means of accomplishing these. In their sinful, selfish selves, individuals are playing a part, just like Nicolaio, which is perfectly expressed by the acting of Fabrizi along with his comic armor, another layer of defense and fabrication. And at every point contrasting to this is the totally

open, unassuming face of Ginepro. The real triumphs over the artificial when Nicolai puts his head on Ginepro's shoulder, giving up and then the siege is called off, the Franciscan spirit has conquered the strong and learned, as the quote of St. Paul at the beginning indicated.[30]

The brief episode after this, the ninth, is a sort of commentary on Ginepro's encounter, where Francis reveals the secret of true happiness: the gift of "triumphing over ourselves and bearing every evil deed and tribulation out of love for [Christ]." Here again we see the silliness of Francis himself, not as an overseer of silliness this time but as an instigator, as he and Brother Leone smile at each other when they decide to start accosting the homeowner. This leads to the final episode when the Brothers as a whole leave Mary of the Angels and return to civilization (noisy and chaotic like the camp of Nicolaio) and we see the Franciscans in action, receiving alms and then immediately turning around and giving them away to the grasping poor, showing the serene joy of unattachment to anything. And finally they separate, Francis the leader having brought them to this point but now leaving simply as one of them. We get no final, glorious close-up shot of the saint.

Having walked through the film and focusing on how Rossellini's theme of silliness and innocence was developed especially through Ginepro and showing Francis only as the leader of this circus, visibly enjoying it, I will make a few

comments on the film style itself. In keeping with the theme of simplicity the film is shot simply. The camera almost always stays at eye level; shots are mostly medium shots with some medium-long and medium-close shots. Extreme long shots are used mostly for coming and going of people, especially the Brothers running.[31] Close-ups are very rare and are used for emphasis, especially in the tent scene with Niccolaio, which is perfect for the purpose of that scene.

The editing is also very simple. There are a little over five hundred shots in the film and the average shot length is 9.9 seconds, the longest being 77.9 seconds the shortest 0.2 seconds.[32] The quickest editing sequences are in scenes of encounters, for example with the traveler and donkey in the hut, Ginepro with the pigs, Francis and Leone with the houseowner, and of course Nicolaio's camp. But the overall rhythm of the film is natural, in keeping with the simplicity of the monks, the average shot length enough to let the viewer take in the scene but without lagging and being too austere.

The sound track of the film is interesting. The realistic noises, such as the rain at the beginning or the wind in the Francis/Leone episode is excellent and adds texture to the rough nature the Brothers are living in. It was not direct sound, but the voices of the Brothers, especially Ginepro, also add texture to their characters.[33] But the non-digetic music at first is extremely disappointing going between melodramatic and spiritual, especially noticeable with the organ music at the inter-

titles. Also, the singing of the monks (counted five times) is essential to who they are and their spirit, but at first it is distancing through the audio quality. However, the music in the end sort of works, a kind of kitschy accompaniment to the fiasco we have just witnessed.

Comparison of Traditional Francis Iconography and Rossellini's Francis

Comparing Rossellini's image of Francis with what we saw in the standard Francis iconography what emerges is a totally different portrait, not merely the fact that this is film and the others are painted. But the actual figure of Francis is consistent with the standard type derived from Thomas of Celano, almost surprisingly so.

The miraculous Francis, be it the stigmata, nativity, bilocating, etc. are left out totally. Meanwhile the historic events shown in the early life cycles are also absent, since the window of time Rossellini shows us is only afterthe blessing of Innocent III but before they preach. The only possible images to compare with might be the scene with St. Clare or possibly sitting with the Brothers. Of course, much of this depends on Rossellini's material, the Little Flowers and other stories, that came after the standard saintly biographies of Celano and Bonaventure. But even exciting stories from the Flowers like the Wolf at Grubbio are left out. This is all in keeping with the effort to be real and historical but also simple. The film does not deny that any of these other things took place. Rather, in its holy simplicity we

actually sense how such things could take place. We say, "Yes, if somebody was to receive the stigmata or talk to a wolf it would be that Francis."

As noted in the standard iconography, there seems to be a move to stress the miraculous and spiritual concerning Francis at the expense of the real poverty and humility. This may have some relation to the fact that if every monk really did live like Francis, or at least Rossellini's Francis, there would be absolutely no money to support the church as an institution. And while the post-Trent images of Francis are highly devotional they are so to the point of portraying Francis with a sort of angst, anemic of all joy. Rather, "It was the peculiar religious genius of Saint Francis that he could combine an utter seriousness with the following of Christ and a healthy love for the world as a gift from God."[34] And this is the neglected side of Francis Rossellini gets at precisely because it is this kind of humble joy that alone can give access to the truths needed today. However, Rossellini also makes it clear that Francis is not a dreamy idler who talks to birds and sun, a holy loveable saint in isolation but instead is in confrontation with the world in the mud, violence, and cold in the here and now. But Rossellini's greatest means of showing this is negatively, by directing attention away from Francis to those he influenced, the simple that listened to his message of simplicity. For it was not only the message that was foolish but the messengers as well. In this sense Ginepro is a much clearer

example of the Franciscan ideal through his naive simplicity than Francis who perhaps had to work harder to divest himself of knowledge, strength and wealth.

In contrasting the film with painted images, a film iconography and traditional iconography, there are obviously many differences including sound, temporal development through moving images and editing which allow for deeper coverage of the subject than any painting ever could. And while it is the strength of paintings that they are permanently there, the Saint in an eternal moment for us to gaze on, a film Francis is dynamic. By projecting Francis onto the screen in moving images he must necessarily reflect himself to us in the actions of others. This allows for a much more profound probing of the psychology of the Saint and the life of the movement he started. It also makes it feel more "real" since it is literally filmed reality, the camera taking in an enactment of the stories in Italy by a bunch of Franciscan monks.

Rossellini's great achievement, in my mind only possible with film, was to show the real side of Francis as an individual in community, rooted in the Middle Ages in the muck and mire along with the spiritual which come together in what appear to be totally absurd incidents. The viewer is left with the option of rejecting it as too fanciful, too real and unspiritual, or too confusing and stupid, or at the center of the tension of these three, to acknowledge the uncanny feeling at the end

that the truth for today is really in these silly tales. The problem then is how to respond to it.

---

[1] On the dating controversy see George Kaftal, St Francis in Italian Painting (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 20.

[2] See Giovanni Morello and Laurence B. Kanter, eds., The Treasury of Saint Francis of Assisi (Milan: Electa, 1999), 56.

[3] See Louise M. Bourdua, "Franciscan Order," Dictionary of Art, vol. 11, ed. Jane Turner, (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 708.

[4] Parenthetical names of artists are inserted to point the reader to a good example of the motif mentioned.

[5] This fact may be influenced by the sources the art was based on, Celano and Bonaventure, as John Fleming notes: "In Bonaventure's work the tendency to subordinate the biographical date of a single thirteenth-century life to the grand eschatological design of God's working in history—a tendency already distinct in Thomas of Celano—is everywhere triumphant." From Bonaventure to Bellini (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 18.

[6] The Francis Trilogy, eds. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), 93, italics original.

[7] Although the identification of the Bellini painting with the stigmata is debated, which is part of the thesis of John Fleming's From Bonaventure to Bellini.

[8] Bourdua, "Franciscan Order," 710.

[9] See Guido Visconti and Bimba Landmann, Clare and Francis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2003).

[10] See Adriano Apra, "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis,'" DVD (New York: Criterion Collection, 2004).

[11] Whom he met making Paisa in 1946. See Apra, "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis.'"

[12] At a screening in Paris with Monsignor Roncalli (later Pope John XXIII) sitting next to Rossellini, the former stroked the latter's sleeve and said, "Poor man, you don't know what you've done." See Virgilio Fantuzzi, "My Conversations With Rossellini: An Interview with Film Critic Father Virgilio Fantuzzi SJ," DVD (New York: Criterion Collection, 2004).

[13] "The Message of The Flowers of St. Francis," in My Method: Writings and Interviews, ed. Adriano Apra, trans. Annapaola Cancogni (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 31.

[14] Ibid, 32.

[15] "From Open City to India, Television conversations," in My Method: Writings and Interviews, ed. Adriano Apra, trans. Annapaola Cancogni (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 118.

[16] "A Discussion of Neorealism, an interview with Mario Verdone," in My Method: Writings and Interviews, ed. Adriano Apra, trans. Annapaola Cancogni (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 37.

[17] Victoria Schultz, "Interview with Roberto Rossellini, February 22–25, 1971 in Houston, Texas," Film Culture 52 (Spring 1971), 13.

[18] Ibid, 14.

[19] "In Defense of Rossellini, A letter to Guido Aristarco, editor-in-chief of Cinema Nuovo," in What is Cinema? Vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 100.

[20] "A Discussion of Neorealism, an interview with Mario Verdone," 40–41. For this reason Bazin calls Rossellini "more a master of line than a painter, more a short-story writer than a novelists. See "In Defense of Rossellini," 101.

[21] See "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis.'"

[22] See "Notes on My Father: An Interview with Isabella Rosellini," DVD (New York: Criterion Collection, 2004).

[23] Two notes of interest on the monks are that Adriano Apra sees the monk who played Ginepro as one of the greatest actors in Italian film (see "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis.'") and Isabella Rossellini recalls the monks who acted in the film, from the monastery at Maiori, when offered money for their part requested it all be spent on one big firework show for the local village (see "Notes on My Father").

[24] "A Panorama of History, an interview with Francisco Llinas and Miguel Marias," in My Method: Writings and Interviews, ed. Adriano Apra, trans. Annapaola Cancogni (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 197–98.

[25] See "A Discussion of Neorealism, an interview with Mario Verdone," 40.

[26] Adriano Apra notes there were eleven episodes planned (the French title of the film attests to this) but one was cut at the last minute before screening at Venice, a scene where Francis meets a prostitute. See "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis.'"

[27] "The Message of The Flowers of St. Francis," 40–1.

[28] I don't know if the monk did his own stunts.

[29] "Notes on My Father."

[30] The learned being beaten is seen in the advisor to Nicolaio, who says "I don't understand these things" in response to Ginepro's comments of his sinfulness, in as much as Nicolaio listening to the message of Ginepro trumps that of his advisor.

[31] I counted eight separate shots of running monks.

[32] See the data collected and posted by the author on the Cinemetrics website: http://www.cinemetrics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=4752

[33] Isabella Rossellini comments that many of the monks couldn't remember their lines and her father just had them count numbers. See "Notes on My Father."

[34] Lawrence Cunningham, Saint Francis of Assisi, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 60.