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Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven Over the Marshes

Abstract

André Bazin's impact, as theorist and critic, is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer, despite his early death (at only 40) of leukemia in 1958. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit, as well as with being the spiritual father of the French New Wave. In 1951 Bazin co-founded and became editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma*, the single most influential critical periodical in the history of the cinema. Bazin can also be considered the principal instigator of the equally influential auteur theory: the idea that, since film is an art form, the director of a movie must be perceived as the chief creator of its unique cinematic style. In this review-essay, Bazin reveals that he was also the most religious of film critics and theorists. He is fundamentally holistic in his Catholicism, however, not remotely doctrinal. Spiritual sensitivity and its enablement through cinema are central to Bazin's view of film as obligated to God, to honor God's universe by rendering its reality and, by means of its reality, its mystery. Thus Bazin believes that Augusto Genina's *Heaven over the Marshes* (1949) is a good Catholic film precisely because it rejects religious ornament and the supernatural element of traditional hagiographies, in favor of creating a phenomenology of sainthood. Genina, that is, looks at sainthood from the outside, as the ambiguous yet tangible manifestation of a spiritual reality that is absolutely impossible to prove. Hence *Heaven over the Marshes* confers sainthood on the murdered Maria Goretti not a priori, like most cinematic hagiographies, but only after the fact.

The history of religious themes on the screen sufficiently reveals the temptations one must resist in order to meet simultaneously the requirements of cinematic art and of truly religious experience. Everything that is exterior, ornamental, liturgical, sacramental, hagiographic, and miraculous in the everyday observance, doctrine, and practice of Catholicism does indeed show specific affinities with the cinema considered as a formidable iconography. But these affinities, which have made for the success of countless films, are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them. Almost everything that is good in this domain was created not by the exploitation of these patent affinities, but rather by working against them: by the psychological and moral deepening of the religious factor as well as by the renunciation of the physical representation of the supernatural and of grace.¹ As for "mysteries," the cinema has been able to evoke only those of Paris and New York. We're still waiting for it to deal with those of the Middle Ages. To make a long story short, it seems that, although the austerity of the Protestant sensibility is not indispensable to the making of a good Catholic film, it can nevertheless be a real advantage.

All the more so, given the fact that the cinema has always been interested in God. *The Gospel* and *The Acts of the Apostles* were the first best-sellers on the screen, and the *Passions of Christ* were hits in France as well as America.² At the same time in Italy, the Rome of the first Christians provided filmmakers with

subjects that required gigantic crowd scenes, which were later seized upon by Hollywood and are still present today in films like *Fabiola* (1948; dir. Alessandro Blasetti) and *Quo Vadis?* (1951; dir. Mervyn LeRoy).³ This immense catechism-in-pictures was concerned above all with the most spectacular aspects of the history of Christianity. These films were simply amplified variations on the Stations of the Cross or on the Musée Grévin.⁴

There is also a second category of religious movie, built upon a principle that perhaps represents an advance on Stations-of-the-Cross films. I'm talking here about the priests' or nuns' story. I have to check this point, but I think we owe the international vulgarization of this type of film to America. The Catholic minority in Hollywood, whose influence is great, found in the cinema a remarkable tool for propaganda. The myth of the "cool" priest who loves sports and jazz easily overshadows the austere reality of the Protestant pastor with a large family. Bing Crosby in a cassock turned out to be irresistible (in *Going My Way* [1944; dir. Leo McCarey] and *The Bells of St. Marys* [1945; dir. Leo McCarey]). I myself preferred Spencer Tracy in *Boys Town* (1938; dir. Norman Taurog) and the ex-gangster priest (Pat O'Brien) in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938; dir. Michael Curtiz): Hollywood decadence! The same trend has not taken hold in France, where we have suppressed the typically Gallic tradition of the ribald monk and the red-nosed priest. Thank God, our cinema has remained relatively free of this new trend, and even if we have

had to put up with *My Priest Among the Rich* (1952; dir. Henri Diamant-Gerger) and *The Scandals of Clochemerle* (1947; dir. Pierre Chenal), at least we have done so with an embarrassed smile.

The hagiographies make up the third category of religious movie. As the cinema is in itself already a kind of miracle, it was absolutely appropriate to show a rain of roses pouring down to springs gushing out of arid sands. Several films were made about Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (a.k.a. Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus) and Bernadette of Soubirous;⁵ the latest of these films, an American one (*The Song of Bernadette*), is only a few years old. Here the cinema has exploited above all the popular belief in miracles. This vein is not exhausted, and our children will probably one day see a *Golgotha* (1935; dir. Julien Duvivier) in 3-D after a color *Quo Vadis?*. We must note, however, that the hagiography has evolved considerably. *Monsieur Vincent* (1947; dir. Maruice Cloche) is a saints picture without miracles,⁶ and Rossellini seems not to have emphasized too much the stigmata and the enchantment of the birds in his *Flowers of St. Francis* (1950).

Heaven Over the Marshes (1949; dir. Augusto Genina), for its part, is about the circumstances that led to the canonization (soon after the completion of this film) of little Maria Goretti, who was murdered at the age of fourteen by the boy whose sexual advances she had resisted. These factors made me fear the worst. Hagiography is already a dangerous exercise in itself, but, granted, there are

some saints made to appear on stained-glass windows and others who seem destined for the painted plaster of Saint-Sulpice,⁷ whatever their standing in paradise might be. And the case of Maria Goretti doesn't seem to be a priori any more promising than that of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Less even, for her biography is devoid of extraordinary events; hers is the life of a daughter of a poor family of farmhands in the Pontine marshes near Rome at the turn of the century. No visions, no voices, no signs from heaven: her regular attendance at catechism and the fervor of her first Holy Communion are merely the commonplace signals of a rather commonplace piety. Of course, there is her "martyrdom," but we have to wait until the last fifteen minutes of the film before it occurs, before "something finally happens."

And even this martyrdom: what is it when you take a close look and judge the psychological motives behind it? A banal sex crime, a trivial news item devoid of dramatic originality: "Young Peasant Stabs Unwilling Girl to Death," or, "Murdered by a Farmhand Whose Advances She Had Rejected!" And why? There is not a single aspect of the crime that doesn't have a natural explanation. The resistance of the girl is perhaps nothing but an exaggerated physiological response to the violation of her sense of decency, the reflex action of a frightened little animal. It's true that she invokes divine will and the threat of hellfire to resist Alessandro. However, it is not necessary to have recourse to the subtleties of

psychoanalysis to understand how the imperatives of catechism and the mysticism of first Holy Communion could kindle the imagination of a frightened adolescent. Even if we take for granted that Maria's Christian upbringing can't be made to substitute for her real, unconscious motives in determining behavior, that behavior still isn't convincing, for we sense that she does indeed love Alessandro. So why all this resistance, which can only have tragic consequences? Either it is a psychological reaction that is stronger than the heart's desire, or it really is the obedience to a moral precept; but isn't this taking morality to an absurd extreme, since it leads to the downfall of two beings who love each other? Moreover, before she dies, Maria asks Alessandro to forgive her for all the trouble she has caused him, i.e., for driving him to kill her.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that, at least in France, this saint's life has disappointed the Christians even more than it has the non-believers. The former don't find in it the requisite religious apologetics and the latter don't find in it the necessary moral apologetics. All that we have here is the senseless crushing of a poor child's life—there are no unusual, mitigating circumstances. Maria Goretti is neither Saint Vincent de Paul, nor Saint Teresa of Avila, nor even Bernadette Soubirous.⁸ But it is to Genina's credit that he made a hagiography that doesn't prove anything, above all not the sainthood of the saint. Herein lies not only the

films artistic distinction but also its religious one. *Heaven Over the Marshes* is a rarity: a good Catholic film.

What was Geninas starting point? It was not simply to reject all the ornament that comes with the subject matter—the religious symbolism and, it goes without saying, the supernatural element of traditional hagiographies (a film such as *Monsieur Vincent* also avoids these stumbling blocks). He set out to achieve much more than this: his goal was to create a phenomenology of sainthood. Geninas *mise en scène* is a systematic refusal not only to treat sainthood as anything but a fact, an event occurring in the world, but also to consider it from any point of view other than the external one. He looks at sainthood from the outside, as the ambiguous manifestation of a spiritual reality that is absolutely impossible to prove. The apologetic nature of most hagiographies supposes, by contrast, that sainthood is conferred a priori. Whether it be Saint Thérèse of Lisieux or Saint Vincent de Paul, we are told the life of a saint. Yet, good logic dictates, as does good theology, that a saint becomes a saint only after the fact: when he is canonized; during his lifetime, he is simply Monsieur Vincent. It is only by the authoritative judgment of the Holy See that his biography becomes a hagiography. The question raised in film as in theology is the retroactiveness of eternal salvation, since, obviously, a saint does not exist as a saint in the present: he is simply a being who becomes one and who, moreover, risks eternal damnation

until his death. Genina's bias in favor of realism made him go as far as to prohibit in any of his images the supposition of his protagonists "sainthood," so afraid was he of betraying the spirit of his endeavor. She is not, and she must not be, a saint whose martyrdom we witness, but rather the little peasant girl Maria Goretti, whose life we see her live. The camera lens is not the eye of God, and microphones could not have recorded the voices heard by Joan of Arc.

This is why *Heaven Over the Marshes* will be disconcerting to viewers who are used to an apologetics that confuses rhetoric with art and sentiment with grace. In a way, Genina plays devil's advocate by playing servant to the only filmic reality possible. But just as canonization hearings are won against the public prosecutor Satan, Maria Goretti's sainthood is served in the only valid manner possible by a film that expressly sets out not to demonstrate it. In short, Genina tells us: "This is Maria Goretti, watch her live and die. On the other hand, you know she is a saint. Let those who have eyes to see, read by transparency the evidence of grace in her life, just as you must do at every moment in the events of your own lives." The signs that God sends to his people are not always supernatural. A serpent in a bush is not the devil, but the devil is still there as well as everywhere else.

Italian film not only has good directors like Genina; it also has excellent cinematographers, among whom Aldo Tonti (a.k.a. G. R. Aldo) is probably one of

the best in the world. To be sure, a cinematographers' art may lie in the direction of self-effacement, and Tonti has given us evidence of this. But it seems that in the last few years, more and more plastic composition has become the rule. This has become a way of integrating into realism a vivid and ornate theatricality, which is no less characteristic not only of Italian film but also of Italian artistic sensibility in general. One could even argue that this synthesis is more radically new than the neorealism of *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), which has always been present, as we know, in Italian film, even if not to so great an extent. (Opposed to it was the public's more pronounced taste for spectacles with magnificent sets and mammoth crowds.)

In *La Terra Trema* (1948), for instance, one sees very well how Luchino Visconti, whose wonderful *Ossessione* (1942) had initiated the rebirth of Italian realistic cinema, strives to create a necessarily grand synthesis between the most rigorous verisimilitude, on the one hand, and the most plastic composition, on the other—a plasticity that perforce completely transforms the verism. Whereas the taste for spectacular grandeur expressed itself in the past through the fame of the star, the magnitude of the set, or the number of wild animals deployed, it has come today to be totally subordinate to the most modest, down-to-earth subject matter. Visconti's fishermen are real fishermen, but they have the bearing of tragic princes or operatic leads, and the cinematography confers on their rags the aristocratic dignity of Renaissance brocade.

Using the same cinematographer as Visconti did in *La Terra Trema* - the amazing Aldo, whom the French studios have let get away⁹ - Genina has been no less concerned to play the game of realism in *Heaven Over the Marshes*. His peasants are as authentic as were Georges Rouquier in *Farrebique* (1947). Whereas three quarters of Italian films, even those made in studios with professional actors, are post-synchronized, Genina recorded the sound on the spot, and his peasant really say what they say. When one considers the enormous difficulty of getting nonprofessional actors to speak as naturally as they behave (see, for example, *Farrebique*), one can appreciate the additional amount of work that Genina imposed on himself in order to obey the dictates of realism, right down to the least discernible details. If this were a minor work, one could regard these details as superfluous. But they are, in fact, part of a coherent aesthetic whole whose essential elements are laid down in the initial script.

To repeat and sum up, *Heaven Over the Marshes* is the prototype of the accursed film that is likely to upset both Christians and non-believers alike. In it, sainthood isn't signified by anything extraordinary, either on the physical or the psychological level. Divine grace doesn't manifest itself in nature as the product of a tangible causality; at most, it reveals itself through some ambiguous signs that can all be explained in quite natural terms. Psychoanalysis or even her simple decency, heightened by a naïve piety, could very well account for Maria Gorettis

martyrdom. From this point of view, I would consider *Heaven Over the Marshes* the first theological film to assert-through the very nature of its characters, story, and events-the total transcendence of grace, which occurs at the expense of apologetics, of Christian propaganda that likes to suppose that sainthood is conferred a priori on saintly lives. Hence the embarrassed reaction in Catholic circles to this otherwise very Catholic film.

(All notes have been provided by the translator/editor, unless otherwise noted.)

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¹ Bazins note: Except, of course, for films whose supernatural quality is both pervasive and authentically religious, like *The Green Pastures* (1936; dir. William Keighley and Marc Connelly) and *The Road to Heaven* (1942; dir. Alf Sjöberg).

² For example, in America: *The Passion Play* (1898; Edison Studios), *Ben Hur* (1907; dir. Sidney Olcott), *The Life of Moses* (1909; dir. J. Stuart Blackton), and *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912; dir. Sidney Olcott). In France: *Quo Vadis?* (1901; dir. Ferdinand Zecca), *La Passion* (1903; dir. Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nouguet), *La Vie du Christ* (1906; dir. Alice Guy-Blaché), and *Mater Delorosa* (1910; dir. Louis Feuillade).

³ For example, in Italy: *Quo Vadis?* (1913; dir. Enrico Guazzoni) and *Fabiola* (1917; dir. Enrico Guazzoni). In Hollywood: *The Ten Commandments* (1923; dir. Cecil B. DeMille), *Ben Hur* (1926; dir. Fred Niblo), *King of Kings* (1927, dir. Cecil B. DeMille), and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932; dir. Cecil B. DeMille). In America subsequent to the publication of Bazins essay: *Ben Hur* (1959; dir. William Wyler), *King of Kings* (1961; dir. Nicholas Ray), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965; dir. George Stevens), and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988; dir. Martin Scorsese).

⁴ Famous museum of wax figures in Paris-the Parisian equivalent of the waxworks exhibitions of Madame Tussaud (1760-1850) in London.

⁵ Saint Thérèse of Lisieux was a French Carmelite nun (1873-1897), born Thérèse Martin, whose saints day is October 3rd; she was canonized in 1925. Films: *Therese* (1916; dir. Victor Sjöström) and *Thérèse Martin* (1938; dir. de Canonge); recently: *Thérèse* (1986; dir. Alain Cavalier).

Saint Bernadette Soubrious (1844-1879) was a peasant girl who had a vision of the Virgin Mary at what has become the shrine of Lourdes. Films: *The Song of Bernadette* (1943; dir. Henry King); more recently: *Bernadette of Lourdes* (Il suffit d'aimer, 1960; dir. Robert Darène) and *Bernadette* (1988; dir. Jean Delannoy).

⁶ A film of the life of Saint Vincent de Paul, directed by Léon Carré from a script by Jean-Bernard Luc and Jean Anouilh (1947). Pierre Fresnay starred and Claude Renoir did the cinematography. Saint Vincent de Paul was a French priest (1580?-1660) who founded charitable orders; his saint's day is July 19th.

⁷ Church in Saint-Germain, Paris.

⁸ See note 5, 2nd paragraph, and see note 6. Saint Teresa of Avila was a Spanish Carmelite nun (1525-1582); her saint's day is October 12th.

⁹ Aldo (born Aldo Graziati, 1902-1953) went to France in 1921 to become an actor but trained there as a cameraman instead. In 1947 he returned to Italy with the crew of a French production and stayed to become one of Italy's most distinguished postwar cinematographers.