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Hail Mary

A reinterpretation of the story of Christ's birth, Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary*, which has been publicly and personally condemned by the Pope, is set in the present day on the picturesque shores of Lake Geneva. Mary, as played by Myriem Roussel, is a student, a shy and dignified young woman. Her spare time is divided between playing basketball and helping out at her father's garage. The swarthily handsome Joseph is a taxi-driver whose thoughts are set squarely on the potential delights of his girlfriend's body. "Could I see you completely naked?" he asks. Consumed with jealousy at Mary's announcement that she is to have a baby, he seems, unsurprisingly, even less likely to believe her protestations of chastity than the kindly local doctor. Both are eventually convinced, but not before Joseph has threatened to throw himself into the lake, and has received some rough treatment at the hands of a foul-mouthed and unshaven Gabriel. Gabriel has already introduced himself to Mary at the petrol station: the annunciation takes place amid a blaze of neon on the garage forecourt. "Gatoil selfservice" reads the sign. *Hail Mary's* relationship with the New Testament is emphatic and, largely because of its setting, bizarre. In the closing sequences the infant Jesus is seen imperiously re-naming his playmates ("From now on your name is Peter"), and refusing to climb into the family car. "I must tend to my Father's affairs", he tells Joseph. Mary is finally shown applying scarlet lipstick to her previously pale lips: a sign perhaps that her spiritual role is now over, that she can return to mundane preoccupations.

It could be said that the familiar storyline is neither here nor there, merely a device which allows Godard to pursue his more pressing

concerns as a film-maker: concerns which are formal and linguistic rather than narrative. There is much of that light-minded game-playing which could come from any of his recent films. There are, for example, the usual jokes about misattributed lines: "While there are Bourbons in Spain, there'll be no peace", suggests Gabriel with an inscrutability which enrages his fellow angel: "That's not your line!" Similarly, the careful and insistent use of repeated shots, as well as the expressively heightened matching of sound and image (here large amounts of Bach and Dvořák), are both typical co-ordinates of Godard's film-making.

The fundamental themes of *Hail Mary* are no more surprising than the avant-garde stratagems. The pervasive feeling of sexual tension, the sense of the ultimate otherness of women, which are reminiscent of Godard's earlier films – of *Sauve Qui Peut*, for example, or *Passion* – are clearly more reminiscent of them than suggestive of the New Testament. Yet the unusual coherence of *Hail Mary* derives from its utilization of what is, put simply, a good story. Its traditional meanings may be beside the point for Godard, but its structural virtues are not. This coherence lends a cumulative strength to otherwise unrelated themes and techniques which have elsewhere looked like mere demonstrations of the director's casual flashiness. *Hail Mary* is not only technically and formally innovative, it is also intellectually persuasive and emotionally highly charged. It must be accounted Godard's best film in many years.