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Myriem Roussel: a miracle or just an unsolvable puzzle?

## Film

# Oh Godard, you devil

## *The Gospel according to Jean-Luc*

by Owen Gleiberman

**HAIL MARY.** A film by Jean-Luc Godard. With Myriem Roussel, Thierry Lacoste, Anne Gauthier, and Philippe Lacoste. A Gaumont/New Yorker Films release. At the Orson Welles.

Since the subject of sacrilege is at hand, let me offer a blasphemous confession of my own: I have never been able to sit through one of Jean-Luc Godard's movies without wanting to throw something (preferably something heavy) at the screen. This aversion has always nagged me, since the critics I respect

most all cherish the guy — or at least his undeniably innovative work of the '60s. Then again, Godard's output, including *Hail Mary* (which I'll get to in a minute, and which I consider a forgettable but morally inoffensive film), has always found its natural audience in critics, who like to sit in the dark analyzing everything they see. And don't his films sound enticing when you read about them! Here's the man who reinvented cinema for the contemporary age: the French visionary who created the jump cut, who scrambled '60s pop culture and revolution and his love of American B-movies, who

gave us "the children of Marx and Coca-Cola" in *Masculin/féminin* and the children of capitalism eating their own kind in *Weekend*, who seemed to swallow the history of Western culture whole (everything from Dante to Bogart to graffiti to Kierkegaard) and then spew it out in a heady comic-strip blur — a chaotic/beautiful essayist for a chaotic/beautiful age. Like I said, sounds great on paper.

But then you go to the movies (and I mean the "good" Godard movies), and what you get, in a word, is obscurity: fractured thoughts, fractured feelings, fractured dialogue and characters and actions — everything so fractured that it yields no more meaning than a pile of shattered eggshells spread across the floor. Godard is cerebral to the point of craziness. His films aren't just chilly and intellectualized; they're psychotic — mosaics of alienation devices designed to keep throwing you out of whatever reality has just been established, so that pretty soon there's no reality left, nothing but the clink of dialogue that has no connection to the sound of

*(For a report on the controversy over Hail Mary's being shown in Boston, see Scott Rosenberg's column in News.)*

people talking and every connection to the hyperactive voices Godard must hear in his dreams. Godard has always claimed that he doesn't "trust" language, yet has there ever been a filmmaker who assaulted you with more of it? Watching a Godard film can be like reading the endnotes to "The Wasteland" — and skipping the poem. With their quotations from random literary sources, their words flashing across the screen in subliminal bursts, their mock-absurdist happenstance, his movies allow you no continuous involvement; all you can do is ingest the flow of ideas and analyze. Some people, I guess, find this stimulating, but to me it's always seemed the soul — the definition — of creative decadence. A work whose effect is to carve away all emotional response may be a valid artistic artifact for an overly brain-quick era (and Godard's films are nothing if not artifacts). But even if you take away a few fleeting impressions, the experience can't enter your bloodstream.

Do Godard's celebrants ever wonder why his films, with the exception of *Breathless*, are rarely revived, and why audiences today greet them with little more than shrugs of baffled indifference? Perhaps it was easier to respond to them in the heated experimental climate of the '60s, when their raw, stripped-down rhythms were new, and when Godard's ideas (prostitution as a metaphor for capitalism and all that) were considered a hip revelation; certainly, it's easy to see that a *Bonnie and Clyde* or a *Mean Streets* are unthinkable without his influence. But influence may not be everything. A movie worth its salt must last — if not till the end of time, then surely 20 years? And what reasonable, halfway intelligent young person today could make heads or tails of *Pierrot le fou* or *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* or *La Chinoise*? A great many people once flocked to Jean-Luc Godard's movies and found them "interesting" (and a great many filmmakers assimilated the freedom of his audio-visual techniques — though not, it's worth pointing out, a fraction of his radical worldview). Today, Godard isn't a creator of any importance, and he isn't "interesting." If only the pope had bothered to sit through *Hail Mary* before issuing his statement of condemnation: he'd have been so confused he might never have bothered to damn the thing.

In *Hail Mary*, Godard is trying to work in a more rhapsodic vein than before. The photography is

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# Hail Mary

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hypnotically clear and dark-toned, and there are many beautiful images of the sun and the moon and ponds and fields; on the soundtrack, in nearly every scene, one hears the tumultuous strains of the Dvořák Cello Concerto. In Godard's previous film, *First Name: Carmen* (also based on a famous old story), it was Beethoven's string quartets; in his own fluky way, the arch-modernist director is trying to become a classicist. Yet even the music is shattered: Godard (purposefully) jumps in at the center of climaxes and then cuts away just as jarringly, so that you seem to be listening to the Dvořák in the middle of an acid trip. There's the usual array of Godardian baffle-the-audience flourishes (a shot of a young woman sitting by a window fondling a Rubik's cube; titles reading "At that time"; dislocating shots of a women's basketball team). And as always, the fragmentation of sound and image works on you viscerally, physically: it becomes a denial of pleasure, of the ebb and flow of human response. That's why all the hoopla about blasphemy is such a joke: to be

blasphemous, this movie would have to be about something.

Godard has given us a contemporary version of the Virgin Birth, but except for a few names it's hardly "the story of Mary and Joseph" — this is the director who couldn't stick to a storyline for 35 seconds if someone held a gun to his head. (And you thought MTV was jittery.) Instead, Godard uses his gimmick for some light comedy and then plunges into a feverish visual poem centering on the enigma of pregnancy itself. Mary (Myriem Roussel) is a quiet and attractive dark-haired Swiss girl who works at her father's gas station and plays basketball; Joseph (Thierry Lacoste), a grouchy cab driver, is her boyfriend — but not her lover. At first, when the self-effacing virgin finds herself mysteriously pregnant, Joseph complains that she must have gone to bed with another guy (not an unreasonable assumption). We're supposed to chortle and think, "No, fella — it was the big guy upstairs." It's only half a joke, though, since the notion that these two good-looking modern people are entwined in a relationship without having slept together is just a makeshift conceit.

But Mary is innocent, and Joseph, bitter and suspicious, must stand by as she withdraws into a private world of eroticism, spirituality, grace. In *First Name: Carmen*, Godard returned to using the sort of fresh-faced young actors he'd featured throughout the '60s (occasionally casting his own tart, pretty girlfriends in lead roles), only he seemed to have no connection left to anything they were thinking or feeling. In *Hail Mary*, the stylized impersonality is complete: you can barely remember what the performers look like from scene to scene. There's another couple in the film, a more conventional pair who sleep together (and are therefore denied heavenly miracles), and for a while I was wondering whether the blond-haired Anne Gauthier was Mary, or whether Myriem Roussel was Mary, or whether they were both supposed to be Mary. How can we tell when there's no true conversation (just snippets of ideas), no interactions? The children of Marx and Coca-Cola have given way to the children of IBM and Thorazine, and you watch them in vain, staring into their ironically blank expressions, searching for the barest

sign of character behind the beautiful masks.

What Godard hasn't lost is his frank adoration of the female form. Having now married a grudging Joseph, Mary doesn't so much accept her special fate as revel in it. Naked, lying alone in bed, her room bathed in shafts of icy blue light, she writhes in soulful abandon, experiencing her miraculous conception as a kind of chaste substitute for erotic fulfillment. Godard is saying that pregnancy and birth are inherently erotic (hardly a revolutionary notion). And it's obviously the nude photography that has so upset the Catholic authorities — for them, the portrayal of the Holy Virgin as even a tastefully erotic figure is far more sinful than, say, the lapsed-Catholic ravings of Ken Russell's *The Devils* (a film that truly is blasphemous). Yet what I found nearly as unfathomable are the critics who've turned around and hailed *Mary* a profoundly "religious" film. The shots of Mary unveiled do have a surging imagistic power; like many avant-garde movies that feature nudity with no pornographic intent, these expressive visions ask us to sit back and contemplate the sheer beauty of skin, hair, breasts. The more you stare at Mary's body, the less familiar it looks, the more enchanting and unique. And her pregnant belly, of course, does seem a miracle — as does any pregnant belly, though if the movie hadn't been called *Hail Mary* I'm not sure anyone would be nattering on about the presence of the divine. Certainly, one reason religion has lost some of its sway is that people today have little trouble accepting the natural world (and even sex) as sacred without invoking the image of an all-powerful being. The world *Hail Mary* unveils doesn't strike me as especially blessed: it's sensually charged, yes, but also disjointed and obtuse — less a world of mystery than an unsolvable puzzle.

There's a masochistic undercurrent to the movie, as there was to *First Name: Carmen*. Both have their brooding male protagonists brusquely shunted aside by unreachable young lovelies; in both, consummation becomes an impossible dream. *Hail Mary* isn't as tortured a vision as *Carmen*, where the hero was rejected, over and over, by the blasé tease of a heroine

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# *Hail Mary*

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(even as the camera drank in her body) and then found himself impotent when he tried to make love to her in the shower. But here, once again, Godard spends most of the time fawning over a body that no one can have. It's that old-time religion: grace tinged with denial. And it's definitely a body that's being revered, not a character. You leave *Hail Mary* with images flowing through the brain, because Godard photographs Myriem Roussel rapturously, obsessively. Yet she remains, to the end, an object — not a sleazy or a sacrilegious one, but an object nonetheless. It strikes me that part of Godard's aesthetic has always been to objectify everything on screen — actors, words, ideas, images — and then to bamboozle us with his big message: that the reality of cinema is a false one, and that what he's doing is making us aware of the illusion. He gives himself too much credit. Reality isn't an illusion in Godard's films — it's a nonentity. The director fears it, twists it, strangles it. □