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Gospel According to St. Matthew

less clear to the unconverted than to those of us who begin with an inbuilt sympathy with the film's message. The main trouble lies in the central character who, both as a dramatic device and as a person, is too negative in conception. She becomes a Fascist out of conformism and convenience; and though this is, eventually, the most effective and the most dangerous manner of political recruitment, it is also undramatic enough, in the event, to make it difficult to argue a point from it. It is a good deal easier to make propaganda (and in the best sense this is the object of *It Happened Here*) out of a more positively motivated hero or villain.

The same sort of subtlety weakens the irony, which at one level Brownlow and Molloy do so well. The newsreel, lauding Fascist achievement and deploring the war brought about in 1939 by the Jewish warmongers, is a take-off of newsreel propaganda so cleverly handled that it might easily seem credible to an uncritical viewer. And again, when the National Socialist Party members are invited to voice their own arguments (a passage of *cinéma vérité* whose great curiosity almost makes one forgive its inappropriateness in the context of the rest of the film), they do it with a sincerity and fervour that could obscure for the naively unprejudiced the malice and hysteria beneath. In a way the film-makers themselves are seduced. They communicate their own delight in the uniforms and military show, in the spectacle of an admirably staged Nazi torchlight funeral. This sort of thing is as insidious as dry rot; history has shown that. This admirably achieved, admirably intentioned film could be hot stuff for an audience with the wrong preconditioning. It is an important factor: to an extent the success or failure of the propaganda is tied up with the success of the film. It does not, however, diminish the importance of the discovery of two new film-makers of undoubted talent.

DAVID ROBINSON

IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO

THE ENTHUSIASTIC OVATION accorded to Pier Paolo Pasolini after the London Festival screening of *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* is not hard to explain. This film of the gospel story is rare in its combination of vigour and restraint. Both qualities are immediately apparent in the choice of the leading players, whose unknown faces conjure up vague parallels in Italian religious painting, and of the mainly classical background music, which carries its own guarantee of a certain kind of emotional response. A Christ drawn just conceivably from Giotto, a Botticelli angel, a Madonna with a hint of Titian or Raphael, have popular connotations similar to those of Pasolini's favourite, and once again freely used, *St. Matthew Passion*, and also, in terms of human experience, to the music of Mozart and Prokofiev, the African Mass and negro spiritual included in the sound track. While there is no great subtlety about this, there would seem to be considerable risk—at least in the kind of comparisons it could invite. Only a very bold, intuitive talent would attempt to strike an emotionally original note or pull new dramatic tensions out of such an obvious associative amalgam. Pasolini's earlier films have shown him to have this kind of talent: an ability to hit the nail, by what looks like some extraordinarily lucky chance, precisely on the head. Here his stroke is particularly light and natural, so that in addition to the familiar fluency, his film has a classical simplicity and grace.

Beginning with the annunciation and nativity and ending with the crucifixion and resurrection, the film is a very literal rendering of St. Matthew. The scenes are shot with an extremely mobile camera, in *cinéma vérité* style, as they might have seemed to a contemporary onlooker. This is straight reporting, not comment, and it therefore quite logically includes the Angel of the Lord appearing in human form to certain people. By the same token, there are no flamboyant displays of supernatural phenomena even at the crucifixion: nothing important that is not very much as St. Matthew described it. Working then within a fixed framework, Pasolini has used his own imagination simply to fill in the details that make human beings real in the context of a film: Mary's long look back towards Nazareth as the family set off for Egypt; the beautiful smile that seems to have been specially reserved for the children who follow Jesus into the temple; the Roman soldier yawning and stretching on the ramparts of Jerusalem as Christ, nearing the end of his teaching, moves among the multitude below, declaiming "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" At the same time Tonino Delli Colli's camera, especially when it is hand-held, often seems to be registering something of the emotional pulse of a participant in events—tracking enthusiastically after Joseph when the angel has just given him the glad tidings; peering into the faces of the newly

called disciples and nudging back in the middle of a slow pan to take in one that had been missed; watching at a distance over Peter's shoulder as Jesus is questioned and accused at the high priest's palace. Perhaps the most remarkable example of this highly sensitive camerawork occurs in the Gethsemane scene, shot with absolute clarity in a kind of fluttering darkness, and at a pace that becomes increasingly agitated up to the swift, almost tangible, moment of betrayal.

Pasolini's problem is inevitably the discourse—a problem which he has, for the most part, circumvented so well that the film has very few *longueurs* (even when seen in an unsubtitled version). Where action is concerned, Pasolini always has the courage to present it exactly according to the Gospel; in a single cut a leper is cleansed or a cripple cured of the need for crutches, and in the last shot Christ is seen, risen from the dead, saying "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." It might have been better to have risked visual monotony by shooting the lengthy, but indispensable, Sermon on the Mount in a similarly straightforward manner. Admittedly this begins well with the camera panning, in typical Italian virtuoso style, across the hills of Galilee during the Beatitudes. But this is followed by a series of close-ups in alternate light and darkness, and even, latterly, backed by a thunderstorm—an ill-advised attempt, one feels, to add interest to lines more than capable of holding their own in any language. Here Pasolini is trying too hard, and the strain has introduced the only note of artificiality in the film.

There are, of course, other elements that may not be to everybody's taste, the most outstanding being the treatment of the crucifixion, which is seen, to an extent undocumented by the gospel, as it affects Christ's mother (played by Pasolini's mother). But this, like so much that is best about the picture, is essentially Italian; and probably only a special interest in the mother-son relationship could have produced the felicitous casting that, in an early scene, points the resemblance between the young Christ and his mother at a similar age. Only in Italy too, perhaps, could a director, due either to an indigenous flair or to the unusually varied nature of the landscape itself, shoot a film that looks so absolutely like everybody's idea of the Holy Land in the first century A.D.

ELIZABETH SUSSEX

"IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO": THE CRUCIFIXION SEQUENCE.

