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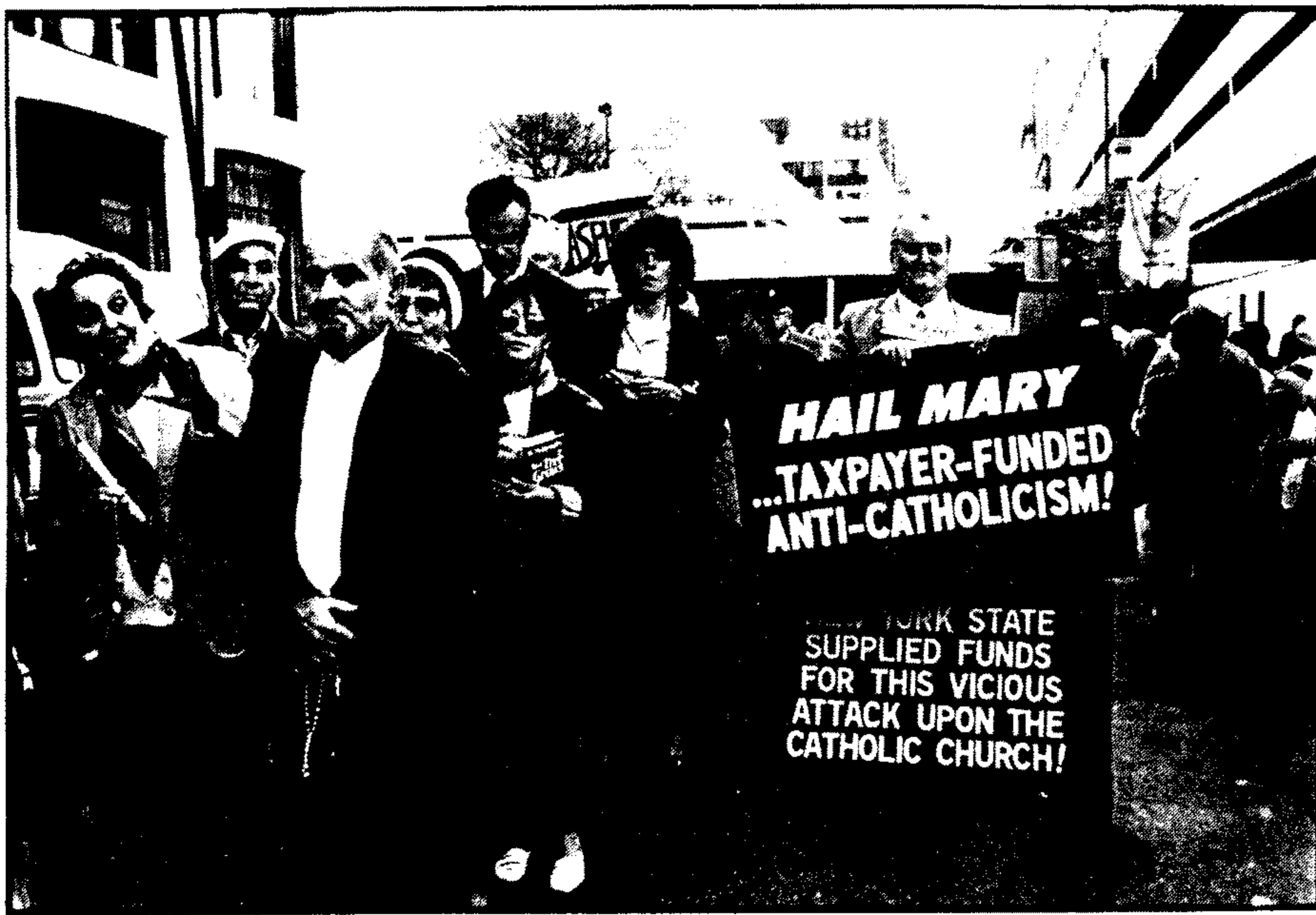


JOHN WATERS

With the Pope as your press agent, you are bound to stir up a little interest. But ticket buyers expecting sacrilegious outrage may be a bit disappointed with the much maligned Jean-Luc Godard film *Hail Mary*. From all the hoopla, I was half expecting a topless Mary on a donkey, writhing her way to Bethlehem, giving rosary jobs to every Tom, Dick, and Harry along the way. If all the fanatical Catholics who are going so berserk over *Hail Mary* (and giving it millions of dollars' worth of free publicity) would bother seeing the film, I doubt they'd still be awake at the closing credits. After all, it is Godard. A friend in California still refuses to ever attend a movie with me after I dragged him to a triple feature of Godard films more than ten years ago. We all know Godard can be difficult, obscure, even pretentious. Yes, *Hail Mary* is all three. But it is also hysterically funny. It's my favorite foreign film since *The Moon in the Gutter* (the *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* of "art" pictures). Go see it with someone

you've sinned with. Buy them an indulgence instead of flowers.

Anybody who has seen Godard's last few films (*Every Man for Himself*, *Passion*, *First Name—Carmen*, *Detective*) knows he is a great wit, crackpot, and eccentric revolutionary all rolled into one. He gives genius a good name. But who would have ever thought he was holy to boot? Well, good Lord, this film is causing the biggest stink since Cardinal Francis "Kitty" Spellman branded *Baby Doll* a one-way ticket to hell in the fifties. Haven't censors figured out by now that the best way to stop a film is to never mention it? Did the hundred or more priests and nuns who showed up to demonstrate at the Rome premiere of *Hail Mary* think they would actually *hurt* the film's grosses? When the manager of the theater was actually beaten the next day, did they feel responsible? When Pope John Paul II rose to the bait and denounced the film and led a special prayer ceremony "to repair the outrage inflicted on the Holy Virgin," did he not realize he was guaranteeing Godard an audience for this film much



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larger than for his past efforts? When Triumph Films (a division of Columbia Pictures, which is owned by Coca-Cola) got cold feet and dumped their planned American release of *Hail Mary*, were they really worried ticket buyers would switch to Pepsi? ("They should drink Coca-Cola anyway," Godard politely quipped at the packed press conference following the press screening at the New York Film Festival.) And did Cardinal John O'Connor of New York and the army of holy-water-throwing demonstrators not realize they were a press agent's dream who turned an obscure French film into an "event"?

Is *Hail Mary* really blasphemous? Can it top the amazing climax of Buñuel's much acclaimed *Viridiana*, where an orgy of filthy beggars riot through a house, listen to Handel's *Messiah*, and are "photographed" by an old woman obscenely lifting her skirts, as they gather around a table drunkenly and freeze into the infamous parody of da Vinci's *Last Supper*? Or Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels*, which tells the tale of a priest sent to exorcise the demons out of a possessed convent who is instead drawn to the earthy charm of Mother Joan, decides to take on her sins, and murders two innocent people for the "love" of his nun? Even the 1951 Supreme Court was caught up in the act of determining what is sacrilegious and decided *The Miracle* was entitled to constitutional protection. The story of a young peasant girl seduced by a vagrant she imagines is Saint Joseph may have raised the hackles of the clergy at the time, but the scene where the villagers taunt the "saint" and crown her with a washbasin halo is now one for the history books. Some even objected to Saint Pier Paul ("I am a Catholic. I am a Communist. I am a homosexual") Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* because it portrayed Mary as

"ordinary" or "cold." Like taste, blasphemy is in the eye of the beholder. Wouldn't Richard Gere as *King David* or Mary Tyler Moore as a nun in the Elvis vehicle *Change of Habit* be considered blasphemous in some communities? The bottom line: Would Flannery O'Connor have liked *Hail Mary*? I wish this one sane Catholic, whose writings on dogma made sense, were still around to explain it all to me.

Godard's "Mary" works in her father's gas station and is something of a basketball buff. Joseph is a cab driver. Before you can say, "The Lord is with thee," the Archangel Gabriel arrives to watch over Joseph (in yet another obses-

sively beautiful shot of an airplane that seems to be a signature of Godard's later films). Gabriel is accompanied by a weird little girl who is his secretary and looks like the spooky child in Fassbinder's *Chinese Roulette*. Together they do all sorts of surreal things, such as tying Gabriel's shoe each with a hand on one lace. Mary, a normal girl if there ever was one, feels pregnant, imagines the upcoming event, and, since she has had no career plans in this direction, is naturally ambivalent in her feelings. Joseph has never slept with Mary, so he is skeptical when Gabriel tells him she is with child and doesn't believe Mary's pleas of "I sleep with no one." "By God, it's incredible," Joseph says with a straight face. "You must be sleeping around guys with big cocks." Mary goes to the gynecologist, asks, "Do souls have bodies?" and he confirms her worst fears. "Tell Joseph," Mary begs.

Mary starts going a little crazy with holiness. She dreams fragments of prayers and thrashes around in the bathtub trying to rid herself of impure desire. At least she doesn't have morning sickness. Joseph is also having a rough time. Mary berates him for being stupid (he reads to his dog and has never heard of Shakespeare), and Gabriel and his assistant hassle him for being a jerk and not knowing how to dress properly. Worse yet, Mary spurns all his sexual advances. "Why does my body repel you?" Joseph gripes before losing his temper and smacking her around. To shut him up, she finally lets him feel her leg only briefly, and I guess theologians will have to debate if this was Mary's first venial sin. "Can I see you naked only once?" Joseph pleads. "I'll only look." Mary can't sleep. After all, she didn't *ask* to be the Virgin

Top: protesters outside Lincoln Center; below: Godard's Mary as basketball buff.



Courtesy New Yorker Films

Mother. "Why me?" you keep expecting her to scream. Finally, Mary relents and allows Joseph to watch her undress, but no "Roman hands" for this girl. Joseph: "I love you" (reaching for her naked body). Mary: "No!" Suddenly, Gabriel appears out of nowhere and wrestles Joseph away from temptation, shouting, "It's the law!" All intercut with beautiful cloud shots, the sun, the moon, trains zooming by, accented by an experimental sound track like no other—insects screaming, intense wind; better than Dolby. Eventually, Joseph is allowed to put his head on Mary's swollen stomach and he becomes resigned to his role: "I'll never touch you. I'll stay."

Mary begins intoning all sorts of lunatic inner monologues—"The Father and Mother must fuck over my body and Lucifer will die," "God is a vampire," and other such nonsense that pushes pretension one step beyond to hilarity and, finally, to a certain insane fluency. She keeps attending those damn basketball games, no matter how pregnant, and, since I have no clue as to the symbolism of those scenes, I instead meditated on the news account I read recently where a nine-month pregnant woman was busted mistakenly in a sporting goods store for shoplifting a basketball under her dress.

We never actually see the birth, but we hear a baby crying over confusing shots of planes flying, snow, and, most perplexingly, a snowplow. Cut to a bloody cow. We see Mary's concerned father ask the new mother, "Will He call Joseph dad?" "That's life," quips Mary with her usual lack of humor. And then we *finally* see a donkey. A great donkey! Framed with reverence, the best single shot in the movie. I almost expected him to whisper in Donald O'Connor's voice, "Hail, Mary," but it definitely is *not* that kind of picture.

When we finally see the Kid, I was disappointed His head didn't spin around. Damien He ain't. As He grows older He does things like putting his whole head up Mary's dress. "He's too young to see you naked," Joseph warns. Crotch level, the Child asks, "What's that?" and, I swear to God, Mary answers, "Hedgery," which must be in the same family as "bush." I'm surprised she doesn't send Him to school at Summerhill. "He who is your Father may forget you, but I'll be around," Joseph lectures. When the Savior runs away, saying, "I must tend to my Father's work," Joseph asks, "When will He be back?" Mary answers, in what must be the most hilarious line in the movie, "Easter."

The finale is priceless. Mary is getting into her car in a parking lot and Gabriel, whom she doesn't know, is waiting. "Madam?" he keeps repeating, but Mary's thoughts are elsewhere. Finally, noticing

Hail Mary actually made me think fondly of religion for the first time in decades.

him, she absentmindedly replies, "Yes?" and he responds reverently, "Hail, Mary." I thought I would levitate out of my seat. It's the very best scene where the title is actually uttered in dialogue. Even better than Taylor and Burton saying "Boom!" for no apparent reason or Debbie Reynolds's cinematic question of the century, "Well, what's the matter with Helen?"

Mary finally lights a cigarette (far less blasphemous than Jane Fonda chain-smoking unconvincingly in *Agnes of God*), puts on lipstick, and, as we hear an angelic chorus, says, "I am of the Virgin." The camera goes in for a close-up of Mary's lips, resulting in an unintentional parody of the credits and print campaign for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The End. Proceed directly to hell.

If this film sounds scandalous, believe me, it's not. Although the cinematography is incredible, the acting first-rate, and the script guaranteed to bring a smile to anyone with a sense of humor who was raised a Catholic, it is also very confusing—hardly a crossover art film to be dubbed for the suburbs. As in most Godard films, half the time I had no idea what is going on, something I wish I could say about many Hollywood films. But the general public is not going to buy it. It's the *Snuff* of art films; take the money and run before word gets out to other sensationmongers that, like *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, you have to sit through a lot in order to see what all the fuss is about.

The film is reverent in its own ironic way. (Some members of the Catholic press have come out and praised the film, and it won the International Catholic Cinema Office Award at the Berlin Film Festival.) As an ex-Catholic who is glad I was raised in the most theatrical of faiths, *Hail Mary* actually made me think fondly of religion for the first time in decades. Who knows what effect *Hail Mary* will have on my own spirituality? Of all people, I never thought *Godard* might tempt me back to the Church. Now, at least, I have a new respect for the outrageousness and originality of

the concept of the Immaculate Conception. Maybe I won't be as angry as I used to be when I hear childhood Catholic trauma stories, such as the one a friend named Mary (her real name) told me recently: All through the year in grade school the nuns showed the class a mysterious hole in the wall at the end of the hall. One by one, each girl was taken to peer in but forbidden to reveal what they saw. When Mary's time finally came, she apprehensively approached, stuck her head through, and saw herself reflected in a mirror across from her, framed in a nun's habit. She finally got to see herself as a nun. Did the good sister accompanying her whisper in her ear, "Hail, Mary"? I wonder.

Is supposed sacrilege the only taboo left? Now that sex and violence have been co-opted by Hollywood, is this the only way to get a rise out of the audience looking for a new kind of exploitation picture? Will there be "spin-off" sacrilegious movies? Will Russ Myer do *The Mary Magdalene Story*? Will Paul Schrader have to deal with the heirs of *Judas*? Can I do the American remake of *Hail Mary*? Divine



Condemned: Rossellini's *The Miracle*, above, and Kazan's *Baby Doll*, below.



would be great in the role, and if any old-fashioned gay gentlemen in the audience cried out, "Oh, Mary!" it could start a whole new trend in modern-day prayers. Oh, Mary. Hail, Mary. ★

John Waters reluctantly attended a Catholic high school in Baltimore, Maryland.