

Not Just a Pretty Face? ***Rev'd Rowan Williams***

How do you portray great spiritual leaders on film? With regard to the depiction of Jesus himself, I am too young to remember the era of the great Hollywood biblical epics, but the question seemed to come alive again during my student years, which saw both Scorsese's controversial 'Last Temptation of Christ' and the, to my mind, more interesting 'Jesus of Montreal', a French-Canadian film in which a group of actors involved with a passion play are irrevocably changed by the experience. More recently still, of course, there has been more controversy, with 'The Passion of the Christ' (2004) arousing strong feelings for a variety of reasons.

It is tempting also to include Monty Python's 'Life of Brian': of course it is not a portrayal of Jesus as such, but it raises some important questions about what is and is not legitimate when transferring any story to another medium. Whether the chosen story is or is not based on real life, it seems to me that the main problem with a visual medium like film is that it can leave so little to the imagination. In the case of attempts to portray the Christian story, we do not know what Jesus looked like, nor will we ever know: but film versions can run the risk of making us think we do, and then rejecting any subsequent experience which does not seem to fit. It is hard enough for some of the faithful to accept the ambiguity which biblical scholars insist is common to all written sources for the life of Christ (Who wrote them? For what purpose, and for what audience? How soon after the actual events? What sort of person did they want to portray to the reader?) but a comparison of the four Gospels quickly reveals that there are indeed four different slants on the same story. With film, such nuances are lost. It offers less freedom to build your own relationship with the Christ as you see him, because you are being confronted in such a direct and concrete way with the Christ that the director wants you to see and relate to. That was my own main objection to 'The Passion of the Christ': not the violence, not the confusion of biblical with non-biblical sources, but the attempted emotional manipulation.

In our post-modern age, we are used to wondering if there is any such thing as 'the facts', or whether straight reportage of 'the story' is ever possible. Try shrinking the Gospel narrative to its essence in order to explain it to someone who has never read 'the book of the film'. It's not an easy task, nor is it a value-neutral one, to decide what exactly that 'essence' is. Very much the same is true of the film versions of the life of Francis. In the course of researching this article, I saw three, none of which I had ever watched in their entirety before: Rossellini's 'Francesco giullare di Dio' (1950), Zeffirelli's 1970 'Brother Sun Sister Moon', and Isabella Cavani's 'Francesco' (1989).

Rossellini's black and white film is extremely interesting: although I am no cinéaste, I gather that it counts as a classic of the genre because of its daring early use of untrained actors and improvisation. Instead of a 'life of Francis', the film presents a series of discrete vignettes or chapters, acknowledging the 'Fioretti' as its source. Another issue of accurate portrayal is raised here: Francis scholars know that the 'Fioretti' are of later date and quite probably

apocryphal, but did Rossellini's audience know that? The subtitle 'giullare di Dio', God's jester, is also a significant comment on the Francis Rossellini seemed to wish to present: the whole film has a lightness of touch consistent with the portrayal of a Francis who played 'violin' with a wooden stick, and includes some supremely comic moments such as the tale of Juniper and the pig's foot. In fact, Juniper rather than Francis becomes the focus of the latter part of the film, with Francis as more of a 'still centre' round whom the main action takes shape.

In each case, the director's choice of Franciscan source material has a marked impact on the film's narrative structure. Rossellini's reliance on the Fioretti, for example, militates against any attempt at linear narrative: some of the major episodes of Francis' life are missing, and there is no mention in the film either of his conversion, or of his illness and death. What remains is a kind of 'essence of Francis'. This effect is probably deliberate, as well as reflecting the episodic nature of its source: for the first few minutes, it is even difficult to tell which of the habited actors is Francis, until his words and presence begin to mark him out. This is lightness of touch taken to extremes.

By contrast, Cavani seems to draw most heavily on the 'Legend of the Three Companions': the film opens with the three, Leo, Angelo and Rufino, reminiscing (together with a refreshingly unromanticised Clare) about their experience of Francis and writing it down for posterity. The portrayal of Francis throughout the film is more or less consistent with that of the 'Legend', which was itself put together out of a particular agenda at a troubled time in the Order's history, and therefore gives a certain emphasis (one might even say distortion) to Francis' behaviour and sayings. Francesco's depiction of Francis' relationship with his father offers a fascinating critique to some of the 'Legend's' primary preoccupations. Francis' black-and-white attitude to poverty is well attested, but the deeper the Order sank into internal debates on the subject, the more uncompromising were the sentiments attributed to him as more stories came to be written down for others to emulate. In nearly all the major sources, Pietro Bernardone is treated as the stock father-figure of medieval hagiography rather than a rounded human character. Cavani makes their relationship much more believable, showing clearly that father and son shared not only frustrated incomprehension but also distress at the breakdown of their relationship. For Cavani's Pietro, his concern with the material is intrinsically linked with his desire to do the best for his family not only in the eyes of the world, but, importantly, also in the eyes of God. Zeffirelli's Pietro, more conventionally, makes a show of piety by dragging his reluctant son to mass, while mistreating his servants and leaving any emotional contact with Francis to his wife: this is far nearer the approach, say, of Celano's first 'Life' in which Pietro is little more than a pantomime villain, but it lacks the sense of emotional struggle which lends verisimilitude to Cavani's version.

But it's not just the use of the sources which is problematic when trying to present Francis sympathetically to a new audience. More than once, particularly with the Zeffirelli, I found myself wondering whether my instinctive aversion was due not so much to the slant it put on the story as to the dated

presentation. Perhaps any attempt to use a thirteenth-century character to speak to 'contemporary' issues will inevitably date, but I was thoroughly put off by the soft focus, the irritatingly whimsical soundtrack, the almost complete removal of any genuine religion from the story in favour of a vague, church-free 'spirituality'; somewhat ironically, the only person who mentions God or the church for the first 30 minutes is Francis' father. Instead, the film relies on sentimental nature mysticism; covering approximately the period between Francis' initial call and the Fourth Lateran Council, it sensibly fades out at that point rather than portray the increasing regularisation of the Order. There is very little sense here of Francis the alter Christus, or of the very real cost of his vocation.

Following on from my earlier comments about the difficulties attendant on giving a face to Jesus, perhaps my real objection to the Zeffirelli version is to the dynamic of expectation set up by the uncanonical prettiness of the lead actor. Thanks to his biographer, the one thing we know about Francis' appearance was that he certainly wasn't pretty! Cavani's Mickey Rourke is also rather too regular-featured if your visual image of Francis has been hijacked by Celano's description or the Cimabue portrait, but his youthful energy and magnetism do seem consonant with the Francis of the sources. Rossellini's Francis avoids this particular cinematic cliché: almost nobody in his film is pretty, except Clare, but his Francis has a finely-drawn, idealist's face. Despite the light-heartedness implicit in the title, the world around God's jester and his followers is decidedly not pretty either, the torture of Juniper being particularly graphic.

At the time Rossellini's film was made, Clare scholarship was very much a minority topic in Franciscan studies: it wasn't until the 700th anniversary of her death in 1953 that Clare studies really began to take off. Not surprisingly, then, Rossellini's Clare does little more than smile seraphically from under her veil. Twenty years on, Zeffirelli does his best with the child Clare who feeds lepers and speaks out against Francis' obsession with military glory, but the adult Clare who runs to him across a poppy field at the base of a mountain is pure schmaltz, bearing no resemblance to the determined 'spouse of the poor Christ' who became abbess of San Damiano in her mid-twenties. Cavani's Clare just predates the renewed interest provoked by the 800th anniversary of her birth, but nonetheless comes across as a much more decisive character: again consonant with those sources which present her as one of the guardians of the 'authentic' spirit of Franciscan poverty. Interestingly, this Clare is neither enclosed (another whole area of unresolved debate in Clare scholarship) nor especially pretty: this is a task-orientated, unromantic portrayal which tackles some of the real dilemmas over a woman's place in the Franciscan ideal.

To someone already familiar with 'the story', assuming it is possible to agree on what the story is, it is difficult to judge the impact each film might have on an audience which was not. Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* wants to present a spiritual epiphany which has little or nothing to do with the institutional Church. *Jesus of Montreal* arguably does the same, but remains a much more challenging film; the twist it gives to the original story is

invigorating rather than distorting. The question attending any 'fictional' portrayal of a spiritual leader must be: would I want to follow the person, as they are presented here, on the spiritual path they advocate? There is much in all three Francis films that is attractive, but to my mind there is only one which transcends the initial attraction and draws the viewer to respond in kind. Speaking personally, Cavani's Francesco was the only one I found satisfying on either a psychological or spiritual level; it does not attempt to airbrush the Christianity out of its characters, but nor does their faith make it impossible to believe in them as human beings. As such, it offers the best visual summary I know of Francis and Clare's essentially incarnational Gospel life. *f*

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