THE RELIGIOUS FILM

Christianity and the Hagiopic

Pamela Grace

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To my children
Katie and Zachary

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Religious Film and the Hagiopic

Lush, vaguely liturgical music floods the theater. A sonorous off-screen male voice slowly articulates the words, "And it was written . . ." or, "In the year . . ." On the screen, clouds mysteriously separate, and a semi-transparent figure appears in the sky. Later in the film, a blood-soaked man, stumbling under the weight of a heavy cross, is savagely whipped as fainting women are escorted away. Or, instead, a young girl is dragged from a dungeon and tied to a stake, where she is set on fire.

Conventional films about religious heroes are instantly recognizable. Average film-goers can easily identify the most common sounds and images, and, more importantly, they can name the particular values that the most traditional films of this kind uphold: blind faith, chastity, extreme forms of virtuous suffering, and the superiority of one religion over all others. What viewers—and film scholars—cannot name is the genre itself.

This book focuses on films that represent the life, or part of the life, of a recognized religious hero, and identifies these films as a genre, which I call the hagiopic—the "holy" or "saint" picture. As its name suggests, the hagiopic is closely related to the biopic—the biographical film—but there are significant differences. Unlike the biopic, the hagiopic is concerned with its hero's relationship to the divine; and the world the

conventional hagiopic portrays is a place found in no other genre of films, a place where miracles occur, celestial beings speak to humans, and events are controlled by a benevolent God, who lives somewhere beyond the clouds.

The term "hagiopic" also suggests hagiography, a significant feature of the genre. Conventional and alternative hagiopics are both concerned with hagiography: the former idealize the hero while the latter may critique this idealization or examine how the hero's ideas have been distorted by followers or religious institutions. In making any film about a major hagiopic hero, such as Jesus Christ or Joan of Arc, the director cannot escape awareness of the genre conventions, and must work with or against them. Pier Paolo Pasolini exorcized himself of the Hollywood influence by making a politicized parody of a commercial Jesus movie, *La Ricotta* (1962), and then went on to create one of the greatest and most unconventional of all hagiopics, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964).[1]

Although hagiopics can be about heroes in any religious tradition, this book focuses exclusively on Christianity, the tradition that is dominant in the Western world and increasingly influential in the United States. The massive, controversial response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, the explosion of Christian entertainment on television in the USA (programs such as *Joan of Arcadia* (2003–5) and the 2005 series *Revelations*), and the expansion of Christian themes in popular movies (such as Neil Jordan's *The End of the Affair*, 1999; Ridley Scott's *The Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005; and Ron Howard's *The Da Vinci Code*, 2006) leave no doubt that films about religion and religious figures are now a significant part of popular culture. The surge of interest in films on religious topics in the early twenty-first century is part of a much larger phenomenon—the rise of the religious right in US domestic politics and the increased influence of evangelical Christianity on almost every aspect of American public life: the courts, education, medicine, and even the armed forces. During the last decade of the twentieth century and the early years of the new millennium, the renewed concern with religion in the United States has been reflected in a vast number of articles on the front pages of newspapers and the covers of mainstream magazines.

The significance and popularity of films about religious figures cannot be measured by movie listings in major cities. The audience for hagiopics far exceeds the number of ticket-buyers, since churches, religious schools, and missionaries regularly show these movies to groups in the United States and other parts of the world. As far back

as the 1960s, the Vatican acknowledged the power of religious films, stating that these movies had taken on the former function of large frescoes and sculptures; they had become "the so-called Bible of the poor."[2] Now, nearly half a century later, films and television programs have become even more influential in the USA as interpreters of the Bible: for many people in all classes, they are the primary sources of information—or misinformation—about the origins of Judeo-Christian values.

The Appeal and Conventions of the Traditional Hagiopic

Why do audiences enjoy watching movies in which virtuous people with visions and miraculous powers are ridiculed, tortured, spat on, crucified, or burned at the stake? What desires and fears do these films address? What are their stylistic conventions, and how do they operate?

In a far more direct way than any other film genre, the hagiopic deals with basic questions about suffering, injustice, a sense of meaninglessness, and a longing for something beyond the world we know. Rather than simply depicting good characters and evil ones and offering pat answers about faith and morality, most hagiopics take us through the harrowing emotional experiences of the protagonist, and sometimes of other characters as well, thus dramatizing inner conflicts that many people experience. Even if these films offer clichéd forms of religious comfort and conventional answers to moral questions—which they often do—they also take the viewer through a journey that involves doubt, struggle, and transformation; and they also usually allow for a variety of responses and interpretations, mirroring spectators' own spiritual questioning.

Hagiopics generally dramatize their questions through narratives that are set in specific long-ago, faraway places. The locations—familiar from a century of religious films, which in turn have derived their iconography from several centuries of painting, sculpture, stained glass, and illustrated Bibles—arouse certain expectations even before any action occurs. Typical settings for films about Jesus and other New Testament figures are the ancient city of Jerusalem with its grand temple and palaces and its underground prison cells, nearby olive groves and desert gardens, small primitive villages with dusty roads, and barren landscapes through which the wealthy are transported by camels and horses as the poor travel by foot. In this world of extreme wealth and dire poverty, we find gloriously costumed Romans and their allies: a king, a tetrarch,

a procurator, and many soldiers whose armor gleams in the sun. We also encounter virtuous, humble people—Jews whose Jewishness may or may not be effaced to make them appear as proto-Christians (a topic I will discuss in Chapter 4). Most of the ordinary people dress in long flowing robes, which emphasize their gentle, respectful movements and speech. Two Jewish men are exceptions to this rule: the hyper-masculine John the Baptist, who wears animal skins and shouts out the word of God, and Barabbas, who may be skimpily dressed, ferocious, and quick-moving. The main female exception to the tradition of modest dress is Mary Magdalene, who appears in the conventional hagiopic as a provocatively dressed prostitute and then transforms into a modest, devoted follower of Christ.

Medieval hagiopics have settings and characters that parallel those of the biblical films in their segregation of rich and poor. Bejeweled kings and queens and corrupt bishops appear in palatial settings, contrasting with characters such as a pious peasant girl, her devoted mother, and a humble country priest, who are found in grottos, tiny houses, and small churches. The settings and characters, of course, vary somewhat from film to film, as we will see in the chapters about individual movies, but the use of generic material makes the events that occur only in the hagiopic seem natural and expected. Just as a spaceship carrying aliens is a normal occurrence in a science-fiction film, so a miracle or an apparition of the Virgin Mary is a standard event in a conventional hagiopic.

Sound is another important element in the special world of the hagiopic. In addition to the sonorous voice-over and liturgically inspired music mentioned above, we may also encounter a Jesus who speaks slowly and possibly with an odd mix of biblical and modern language, and female visitors from the heavens who have soft, gentle voices. We know when an apparition is imminent, because it is usually preceded by generically specific rustling wind sounds; and in many films we can recognize the resurrection scene with our eyes closed because it is traditionally accompanied by the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's *Messiah*.

The stylistic conventions of the religious film are exaggerated and sentimental, to say the least; indeed, they can verge on the ridiculous. Consequently they are endlessly parodied in comedies, television advertising, and even some hagiopics. The over-the-top quality of the most clichéd moments often adds an element of playfulness and reflexivity, even in scenes that attempt to convey a sense of the sacred. This double meaning skillfully addresses a broad range of intended viewers: believers, non-believers, and people with mixed feelings. The genre's conventions produce a specific cinematic world that film-goers

can enter, perhaps seeking wholesome, instructive entertainment for their children, maybe hoping to strengthen their own wavering faith, or perhaps simply anticipating the pleasures of the familiar, spiced with a few surprises. The conventional hagiopic is a nostalgic genre. Its old-fashioned devices and long-ago settings suggest that in previous eras, at least for the fortunate, life was less complicated and therefore better than it is now. In contrast to the hagiopic's miraculous realm, where God or his messengers speak directly to the protagonist, the modern world can seem like a place of multiple losses: loss of certainty, loss of the divine order, and loss of meaning.

Wish-Fulfillment and Miracle-Time

The conventional hagiopic is also a genre of wish-fulfillment. These films provide a set of comforting reassurances: they assert that we are never alone, because there is a God who sees all and hears every prayer; they tell us that good will be rewarded, evil will be punished, and justice will ultimately prevail; and they depict a world that is always pregnant with the possibility of heavenly visitations and divine intervention. This miraculous environment is not identical to the world described by any actual Christian denomination. The expectations, sounds, and images of the hagiopic comprise a genre-specific cinematic world—a singular kind of fictional time–space configuration. Mikhail Bakhtin referred to such configurations as "chronotopes"—time–space realms evoked by particular literary genres. Bakhtin's first example, "adventure time," the chronotope of the Greek adventure novel of ordeal (100–500 CE), is a magical time–space in which the hero travels vast distances over mountains and across seas, having adventures that, in real time, might take decades. The hero returns, as young as when he left, finding his still-young and beautiful beloved, who awaits him as if he had departed only days before. The lack of realism in this genre, Bakhtin points out, is insignificant, because readers intuitively understand that the purpose of the stories is to provide a dramatic illustration of constancy.[3]

The name I have given the hagiopic's time–space configuration, or chronotope, is "miracle-time." In miracle-time, the blind and the lame can be cured; lowly peasants can be honored with divine visitors; the relentless march of chronological time can be stopped; and there is a sense that the fullness of time will eventually arrive. In traditional Christian theology, Jesus is seen as bringing together radically different kinds of