

The Gospel according to Alice Guy:  
a cinematic life of Christ by the world's first female director<sup>1</sup>

*David Shepherd*  
Trinity College Dublin

While the life of Jesus has been and continues to be very well-known, the same cannot be said for the life of Alice Guy, even amongst film historians, until relatively recently. Born in a suburb of Paris in 1873, Guy spent her earliest childhood in Chile before returning to Europe for her schooling. Originally employed as a secretary by Leon Gaumont, Guy was soon enlisted by him to direct and create moving pictures for the projector Gaumont was marketing. Given that Guy was soon responsible for all aspects of the creative and production process, she was arguably not merely the cinema's first female director, but also its first female producer and studio head.<sup>2</sup> Of the many films she created during her 11 year tenure at Gaumont, the longest and the one of which she was most proud, was *La naissance, vie et passion du Christ* (or *La Vie du Christ*, the title by which it became more widely known), released in 1906.<sup>3</sup> Like the cinema generally, the creation of films of the Christ had

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this and other films in the 'Silent Jesus' tradition see now Shepherd, ed., *The Silents of Jesus in the Cinema (1897-1927)* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Guy's own memoirs (Alice Guy Blaché, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, ed. Anthony Slide, trans. Roberta Blaché and Simone Blaché (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986) see Victor Bachy, *Alice Guy Blaché (1873-1968): La Première femme cineaste du monde*, (Perpignan: Institut Jean Hugo, 1993) and Alison McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema*. (New York: Continuum, 2002) for a readable and well-researched retelling of the story of Alice Guy and attempt to restore her to her rightful place in the history of the early cinema. See also most recently the contributions collected in Joan Simon, ed., *Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

<sup>3</sup> With an original running length of 660 metres, *Vie du Christ* was more than twice as long as even the longest of the other films made by Gaumont in 1906 (*La Brésilien de Paris*, 300m). For an effort to catalogue Gaumont's production see Philippe d'Hugues and Dominique Muller, eds., *Gaumont, 90 ans de cinéma* (Paris: Cinémathèque française, 1986).

been—and after Guy would largely continue to be—the preserve of men.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, while women such as Gene Gauntier and Jeanie MacPherson would respectively write the screen plays (and more) for Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), Guy remains the only woman to direct a filmic life of Jesus in the silent period.<sup>5</sup> While Guy's gender and its potential influence on her film-making have hardly escaped the attention of previous scholarship, we offer here for the first time, a close reading/viewing of the film as a whole as a means of testing previous suggestions that Guy's filmic gospel, *La Vie du Christ*, reflects a particular interest in female characters and concerns.<sup>6</sup> Unlike some previous efforts, this reading seeks to situate the film's depiction of

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<sup>4</sup> The first cinematic Passion, filmed in Paris in the Spring of 1897 was the work of a former pornographer, Albert Kirchner, while the second filmed in Bohemia later that summer was written by Paul Gröllhesl, a local of the region and shot by the Lumière Brothers' representative in New York, William Doc Freeman. The Eden Museum's filmic version of the 'Oberammergau' play shot in 1898 was adapted by William Hollaman and his colleague Eaves from a play by Salmi Morse. Philadelphian Sigmund Lubin's own film of the Passion appeared later that same year and then the first of the famous Pathé productions of *La Vie et Passion de Notre Seigneur Jesus Christ*, created between 1902 and 1905 by Guy's former assistant, Ferdinand Zecca and his assistant Lucien Nonguet. For more on the history of these earliest examples of the "Silent Jesus" see Charles Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play: Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880-1900," *Film History*, 5:4 (1993), 419-56 and David Shepherd, *The Bible on Silent Film: Spectacle, Story and Scripture in the Early Cinema*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11-34.

<sup>5</sup> On the significance of women's scenario writing in the early cinema, see Donna R. Casella, "Feminism and the Female Author: The Not So Silent Career of the Woman Scenarist in Hollywood—1896–1930," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 23:3 (2006), 217-235.

<sup>6</sup> Suggestive comments in this direction are offered by Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896-1914* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 66 and McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché*, 105-6. Gwendolyn A. Foster, "Performativity and Gender in Alice Guy's *La Vie du Christ*," *Film Criticism*, 23:1 (1998), 6-17, provides helpful observations regarding performativity (à la de Certeau and Butler) and gender in the film, but only discusses the actual portrayal of women in a few scenes. Cf. also Gwendolyn A.

women within the evolution of the 'Silent Jesus' which was already under way when Guy turned her hand to the genre.

According to Guy's own memoirs, her desire to '...make a film about the fine drama of the Passion.' predated but was also fuelled by her purchase of a copy of Jacques Tissot's illustrated Bible in 1900.<sup>7</sup> Guy's further comment that Tissot's illustrations were 'ideal documentation for decors, costumes and even local customs.' has prompted some tracing of Tissot's influence on Guy's film not only with respect to its backgrounds, scenic composition and costumes but also its documentary-like portrayal of scenes such as the scourging, within an overtly theatrical *mis-en-scène*.<sup>8</sup> As will become clear, however, the influence of Tissot's Bible on Guy was even greater than has been previously suggested, not least in her representation of women.

Given that Tissot's *Life of Christ* illustrated hundreds of narrative moments from the gospels, it was clear that no early film-maker could compete with the comprehensiveness of his coverage. Yet it is clear that Guy's selection of scenes is far from haphazard and in fact reflects her fascination with interests which appear periodically in her other films for Gaumont. So, for instance, in *La Noël el de M. la cure* (Gaumont 1906), a parish priest is in need of a statue of the infant Jesus for his Church crèche, but without the money to purchase one, sets up an empty manger in front of a life size statue of the Virgin Mary holding the baby. The parishioners prayers are answered when two angels appear and Mary comes to life

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Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 58ff.

<sup>7</sup> This is less clear in Blaché, *The Memoirs*, 45, than it is in Guy's interview with Victor Bachy, "Entretiens avec Alice Guy," in *Les Premiers ans du cinéma français: Actes du colloque international de l'institut Jean Vigo*, ed. Pierre Guibbert (Perpignan, France: Institut Jean Vigo, 1985), 39,

<sup>8</sup> So, Foster, "Performativity and Gender," 9-10.

and places the baby Jesus in the manger.<sup>9</sup> As Méliès had proved early on with his *Christ marchant sur les flots* (Star Films, 1899), the gospels offered much grist for the mill of filmmakers with a penchant for miracles, including Guy. While angels had appeared in Pathé's earlier versions of the 'Silent Jesus,' Guy's sustained fascination with them and with Mary and the other women of the gospels had no real precedent in the genre.

Given that Guy's first scene, of the holy couple arriving in Bethlehem in search of an inn, had never been committed to film before, it's likely that Guy's shooting of it was inspired not by Tissot's illustration but by his accompanying notes which emphasize the busyness of Bethlehem.<sup>10</sup> This busyness is reflected in the two groups of travellers who enter the scene and are turned away by the exasperated inn-keeper before Joseph and Mary finally arrive, the latter resting heavily upon her husband's shoulder, then waiting patiently to the right of the frame while her husband approaches the door, then sinking to the ground when her husband's enquiries and her own entreaties are met only with a dismissive rebuke and a slammed door.<sup>11</sup> Joseph crouches by his fallen wife and appeals to a passing Roman soldier on horseback, but the latter's angry gestures and the couple's rapid exit to the right of the frame suggest that he will be no more accommodating than the inn-keeper. Thus from the beginning of Guy's film, Mary is, in true melodramatic fashion, a woman who feels things deeply and whose physical strength is undermined by the emotional toll which is being taken

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of this film within the context of Guy's oeuvre see, McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché*, 99.

<sup>10</sup> J.J. Tissot, *The Life of our Saviour Jesus Christ: Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Compositions from the Four Gospels with Notes and Explanatory Drawings*, trans. Mrs. Arthur Bell (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., 1897-8), 17: 'The travellers summoned to be taxed by the decree of Caesar Augustus, when Cyrenius was Governor of Syria, must have been very numerous, and the one caravansary the town could boast, must have been quite insufficient to accommodate them all.'

<sup>11</sup> The reappearance of this motif and especially the similarity of set and scene composition suggests that Zecca has drawn upon Guy's film in his 1907 production for Pathé (see pp. ??).

on her by her divine vocation. Moreover, in this opening sequence, Mary's maternal vulnerability and melodramatic sensitivity to her need to care for the unborn Christ is juxtaposed with the callousness of the male-innkeeper and the mounted male might of the Roman soldier. That this emphasis is no accident is supported by comparison with Ferdinand Zecca's less starkly gendered version of a similar scene for Pathé's *Passion* film the following year.<sup>12</sup> Not only is Zecca's Mary spared collapse by her husband's staff on which she leans while he makes enquiries, Zecca replaces Guy's angry Roman soldier with a sympathetic young girl who does not move them on, but rather directs them toward alternate accommodation.

In the scene of the nativity and the visit of the magi, Guy introduces a feminine presence in the shape of two women within the retinue of the Magi, who come and bow to the infant Jesus and then take up positions nearest the manger itself—precisely where Guy and the audience would expect any maternally minded women to locate themselves.<sup>13</sup> That two women are given pride of place within the composition of the scene and are moreover allowed to visibly participate in the adoration alongside the Magi is our first hint that Guy's concern and maternal interest will extend far beyond Mary.

Indeed, this theme is picked up by Guy in her third scene, which again has no precedent in previous films of the "Silent Jesus," and may reflect not so much an embracing of the values of Tissot, as a conscious reaction to and rejection of them. While the flight to

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<sup>12</sup> For brief comparisons of these two films see Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*, 164-66 and Alan Williams, "The Sage Femme of Early Cinema," in *Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer*, ed. Joan Simon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 39-41.

<sup>13</sup> While Tissot's painting may have inspired the portrayal of the gifts of the Magi in Guy's following scene of the Nativity, neither his narrative nor his illustration offer a precedent for Guy's inclusion of two women in the Magi's retinue.

Egypt had already become a staple of the genre,<sup>14</sup> no European film production had attempted to represent the precipitating episode: ‘The Massacre of the Innocents.’<sup>15</sup> Tissot however has no qualms about depicting the scene and does so in graphic and harrowing detail. While it is not so very surprising that Guy passes over this scene, what is interesting is that she offers her audience an entirely novel scene at this point entitled, ‘Le Sommeil de Jesus/The Sleep of Jesus.’<sup>16</sup>

In this scene, Guy depicts Mary doting on the infant Jesus who is sleeping in his crib outside the house, *en plein air*. She is persuaded (albeit reluctantly) to leave her child by an insistent Joseph whose actions and unheard words intend to reassure her that the child is fine and that Mary may come away into the house. When Mary allows herself to be drawn away from the baby, up the steps and into the house by her husband, a bevy of angels appear out of thin air to serenade the baby (Fig 3.1), disappearing again just before Mary returns.

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<sup>14</sup> As early as the film of the Höritz Passion play (see n.1).

<sup>15</sup> The scene had, however, been included in the American “Silent Jesus” films produced in 1898 by Hollaman and Eaves and Lubin respectively.

<sup>16</sup> Here again, the influence of Guy’s film on Zecca’s film for Pathé the following year is evident from his inclusion of the angel orchestra between his scenes of the ‘Massacre of the Innocents’ and the ‘Flight to Egypt.’



Figure 3.1, Angels serenade the infant Jesus to sleep in ‘Le Sommeil de Jesus/The Sleep of Jesus.’

Tissot’s fascination with angels (e.g. *Jesus ministered to by angels*) is both reflected and transformed in Guy’s film. Not only do female angels appear on the titles which introduce each scene,<sup>17</sup> but angels appear within the diegesis as well, in this scene, as protective angels which offer a lullaby to the infant Jesus. The late Victorian fascination with angels extended to their role as guardians not least over young children and infants, so Guy’s invoking of them here is far from unexpected. However, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century also afforded a particular prominence to the notion of the Victorian mother and wife as “the angel in the house,” a notion evoking the imagined and idealized purity of the woman of the house.<sup>18</sup> Here we see Guy blurring the lines between these notional angels: even when the angel in the house is not watching over her newborn, the viewers (including mothers) are reassured that there are other angels watching over him.<sup>19</sup> In her scene of the sleep of Jesus, Guy thus offers a domestic idyll, in which the appearance of the angels to watch over and serenade the Christ child to sleep appears to offer the viewer a symbol of the same divine protection offered by

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<sup>17</sup> Foster, “Performativity and Gender,” 13.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see Foster, *Performing Whiteness*, 58ff.

<sup>19</sup> The production still reproduced by Foster, “Performativity and Gender,” 13 shows Mary and Joseph staring on as the angels play. The intent of the moving pictures as shot was precisely the opposite as illustrated by the frame capture offered here, which shows the angels present precisely when Jesus’ parents are not.

the angel who appears to Joseph to encourage him to flee to Egypt to escape the massacre of the innocents (Matt. 2:13). Guy shifts the focus away from the biblical Joseph's intervention to save the holy family, toward a depiction which foregrounds stereotypically maternal anxieties and concerns. At the same time in Joseph's actions we see a foreshadowing of male intervention which will throughout the rest of the film intervene and thwart female affection and support for Christ.

Guy's next scene is Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman chronicled in John chapter 4—a scene introduced into the "Silent Jesus" tradition first by Siegmund Lubin (1898) and then by Zecca in his first production for Pathé (1902-5) but also found in Tissot's illustrations. Given that elsewhere Guy's actors will not shy away from the expression of emotion or passion, the comparatively restrained reactions in this scene both of the woman at the well and the disciples, may suggest Guy's intention to normalize Jesus' encounter with the woman from Samaria (*contra* the text itself in John 4:9).<sup>20</sup> More significant, however, is Guy's selection and positioning of the scene within the wider filmic narrative which she constructs.<sup>21</sup> While the end of the scene necessarily presupposes Jesus' prior calling of the disciples—a scene she chooses not to include—Guy's decision to begin her filmic depiction

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<sup>20</sup> Here again, the similarities to Zecca's later production (1907) are marked, particularly in scenic composition, but the primary difference between the two lies in the strength of reaction on the part of the woman and the disciples. Zecca's Samaritan woman offers a more dramatic reaction, visibly scandalized by Jesus' understanding of her situation. Guy's Samaritan woman is less shocked and her reaction is less dramatic. The same might be said for the disciples, who in Zecca's film are certainly scandalized by Jesus talking to the woman. Guy's disciples appear less so, even if both sets of disciples are authoritatively reassured by Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> This is quite unlike Guy's male predecessors, who commence the adult ministry of Jesus with scenes which are not focused particularly or primarily on women: 'Jesus in the Synagogue' (Lear, 1897), 'John's Baptism of Jesus' (Horitz, 1897), 'Herod and the Baptist' (Hollaman/Eves 1898), 'The Resurrection of Lazarus' (Lumières) 'Jesus the Carpenter' (Lubin, 1898), 'The Wedding of Cana' (Zecca, 1902-5).

of the adult ministry of Jesus with Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman is unprecedented in the cinematic tradition and would not be repeated in the silent era. Such a strategic positioning of this episode serves to establish the theme for the filmic narrative to unfold: that Jesus is one who is ministered to physically by women but also that his ministry may be first and foremost to and for women and their redemption.

Guy's vision of Jesus' as redeemer of women is furthered by the episode which she includes next, namely Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter—a scene which had, again, never been filmed before Guy. In his production the following year (Pathé, 1907) Zecca would follow Guy by including a shorter and simpler version of this episode, in which Jesus' healing of others is interrupted by Jairus' plea for Jesus to enter his house. Jairus' initiative draws Jesus into the house where he finds the man's daughter on the bed with her mother at her side. It is Jairus who kisses the hem of Jesus' cloak—leaving father and daughter in the foreground and mother firmly in the background. While Zecca thus reproduces the emphasis of the biblical narratives of Jairus and his daughter found in Luke 8 and Mark 5, Guy's version the year before is not merely more complex, but also gendered in a markedly different way.

Guy's scene opens in the interior of a house with the bed of a young woman surrounded by not only her mother and father but others as well. While the father is hidden behind the group near the bed, and gesticulating anxiously, the mother takes centre stage alongside her daughter. It is the mother who signals for water to be brought and given to her daughter and after she has drunk it, it is the mother who shakes her head in dismay at her condition. While Jairus is sent out to seek help, the mother offers the daughter something else to revive her but when she fails to respond, the anxious mother clasps her hands to her mouth and is quickly consoled by first one female friend and then another. When Jairus returns with Jesus, it is the mother who makes a point of imploring Jesus to do something and

when Jesus raises the young girl it is to her mother that she goes first, and only then to her father, which then frees the mother to throw herself, along with the other women at Jesus' feet, kissing the hem of his robe in gratitude and adoration. (Fig. 3.2)



Figure 3.2, The wife of Jairus kisses the hem of Jesus' robe after her daughter is raised.

In its basic outline, Guy's scene is a variation on that particular species of melodrama which was so prominent in the early French cinema and revolved around the real or imagined threat to the nuclear family, often to the child. Indeed, in 1906, the year Guy made *La Vie du Christ*, Richard Abel can point to two Pathé films, *La Loi de Pardon* and *Pauvre Mere* whose respective dramas focus specifically on the emotional bond between mother and daughter and the threat to it.<sup>22</sup> Seizing on the gospels' inclusion of both mother and father in Luke 8 and Mark 5, Guy shifts the focus from Jairus and his daughter to Jairus's wife and her daughter. Whilst Jairus departs, Guy remains focused on the frenetic activity of the mother and other females to save her daughter and the trauma of her failure to do so. It is thus no

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<sup>22</sup> Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*, 135-36.

surprise that it is Jairus's wife who implores Jesus and that the response to Jesus' intervention is ecstatic devotion from Jairus' wife and her fellow women.

Guy's final scene of the ministry of Jesus is yet another one which does not appear in the cinema prior to her. While in Luke 7, the name of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet is unmentioned, Guy follows Tissot in identifying her as Mary Magdalene. The biblical text is not aware of any female presence within the episode apart from the woman who anoints Jesus, yet in Guy's scene, this female presence is established from the beginning by the female ensemble playing instruments. Guy's provision of female musicians, reflects the tradition of female entertainments (including especially dance) which was a staple not only of the early French cinematic tradition (including especially Gaumont's output around the turn of the century), but also of the biblical film in its earliest incarnations.<sup>23</sup> Yet, within the narrative of Guy's film, these female musicians might also be seen as specifically echoing the minstrel angels in the earlier scene, 'The Sleep of Jesus.' If so, the impression created by this intertext is that the guardian angels of his infancy may continue to watch over Jesus, now in his ministry. Guy's further willingness to shift the narrative focus away from the male-oriented tradition of the Lukan gospel account is clear from her introduction of two women, *de novo*, who appear to pay their respects to Jesus. Catching sight of the approaching Magdalene, one of the women signals for the servants to have her thrown out, but Jesus intervenes and signals for the servants to allow her to come, which she does. When her pouring of the perfume on his feet and her drying of them with her hair disconcerts the men, Jesus rebukes them too. However mild, Jesus' earlier rebuke of the Samaritan woman establishes Guy's willingness to depict a range of interaction between Jesus and the women in his orbit; here Jesus' criticism of the judgmental Pharisee (Luke 7:39-50) is delayed and

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, the female dancers who appear in the Golden Calf scene in Pathé's *La Vie de Moïse* (1905) and in the Philistine feast in Pathé's *Samson et Dalila* (1902).

displaced by Jesus' (Guy's?) rebuke of women who judge each other. Moreover, like the Samaritan woman, the 'sinful' woman who anoints is not only blessed by the grace of Jesus extended to the sinner, but is also given an even more intimate opportunity to care for the body of the Christ—a motif which will reappear in Guy's realization of the "passion."

The transition from the 'life' to the 'passion' of Christ is effected by the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to much adulation and waving of palms. Here again, Guy offers a prominent place to women. Indeed, whereas in Zecca's film the following year, it will be men who spread the cloaks before Jesus, in Guy's scene it is the women; given her traditionalist tendencies, it is not impossible that Guy perhaps judged this to be more likely women's work than men's, yet in the context of her narrative, and increasingly so in the passion, the quintessential work of women is to care for the Christ. While Zecca's film will have the parents restrain their children, the women's lifting up of the children for a blessing in Guy's film may have been inspired by Matthew 21's account of the entry in which children are singled out for their praise of Jesus (21:15), especially given that Jesus' welcoming of the 'little children' appears only two chapters earlier in Matthew (19). Indeed, children feature prominently in the foreground of Tissot's illustration of this scene and the subject of children dominates Tissot's accompanying notes. In the context of Guy's film, this scene resumes her interest in the maternal desire for the ministry of Christ to bless children, first illustrated in the scene of the raising of the daughter of Jairus' wife.

In a scene as iconic and as traditionally dominated by men as the 'Last Supper,' Guy's interpolation of the feminine requires extraordinary creative measures, but in this she again appears to have been aided by Tissot's illustrations. Influenced by the composition and shading of his scene and Tissot's image of Judas' dipping of the bread in the cup (Mk. 14:20), Guy may also have been inspired by one of Tissot's small illustrations, entitled *Holy Thursday*, in which two angels are portrayed holding a clock showing the hour. After the

bread and wine, Judas sees a vision of three angels appearing above a Jesus clad in the loincloth he will wear on the cross. If the angels are women, as they appear to be, this is a resumption of the theme of females (whether earthly or heavenly) caring for Christ as his crucifixion draws near.

The Gethsemane sequence, shot in the open air, begins with Jesus alone, evidently agonizing over what awaits him. As he walks around the enormous boulder which dominates the shot, another female angel materializes atop it, holding aloft the 'cup' from which Jesus asks to be spared. Only Luke (22:41-44) mentions the appearance of an angel at this point, and it is his account which makes sense of the action in Guy's scene: Jesus prays that this cup might be taken from him (22:42), and eventually kneels on the rock to pray 'more earnestly' (22:44) but only after an angel appears 'to give him strength' (22:43). This confirmation that the female angel is not the bearer of the cup, so much as the one who will give Jesus the strength to drink it, follows naturally on from the non-scriptural appearance of the angels in the upper room (see above) and Guy's narrative as a whole.

In the scene of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, Tissot's illustration and narrative emphasize that only Peter and John followed the group which took Jesus away. Guy's scene, however, ends with the holy women summoning Mary (whose hands are clasped anxiously) before they all rush horrified and traumatised after Jesus and his captors. Suggested already in the previous scene, Guy's gendered vision of the passion, of the suffering caused by male antagonism and the compassion of females which resist and mitigate it, is confirmed both here and in Guy's scene of the trial before Caiphas. While the set design of the latter owes much to Tissot's illustration of the scene (cf. especially the balustrade and columns), the action is very much of Guy's own making. Not content to wait for Jesus behind the columns which mark off the 'gallery' of Caiphas' court, the women and children are brusquely put in their place by a soldier as Jesus approaches, though their re-appearance in the same place

soon after testifies to the women's desire to be present with Jesus. Rather more remarkable and certainly more prominent are the two women whom Guy has enter the court and speak quite passionately and demonstratively in Jesus' defence before Caiphas (Fig 3.3). Indeed, even when male accusations and judgments drown out their protests, these two women actually physically resist the tide of male fury which seeks to sweep Jesus from the courtroom, even succeeding for a moment in pushing Jesus back toward Caiphas, before the male mob overwhelms them and Jesus is dragged off to Pilate.



Figure 3.3, Two women stand with Jesus to defend him against male accusation and judgment in the house of Caiphas.

Following Guy's depiction of the denial of Peter, which serves to confirm Jesus' rejection by the world of men, she includes, for the first time in the history of the "Silent Jesus," the narrative moment preserved in Matthew 27:19 where Pilate's wife sends word to her husband that she should have nothing to do with the innocent Jesus because of a dream she has had. Here, Tissot's influence may be seen again, not just in his visualisation of the scene (e.g. the checkerboard pattern on the pillar), but also in his accompanying notes which dwell at some length on the virtues of Pilate's wife and her pious, apocryphal afterlife in Christian tradition. Within Guy's narrative, Pilate's wife is of course, yet another woman

who is *for* Jesus—affirming his innocence of anything that warrants the sort of abuse and mistreatment which her husband, Pilate proceeds to permit.

It is very clear that Tissot's scene of the flagellation or scourging is again very influential visually but in Guy's scene, but for our purposes it's worth noting that again the holy women attempt to stop the violent abuse meted out on Jesus by the men and once again they are brushed aside. Guy positions the women in the foreground, nearest the viewer, offering an even better vantage point for them to model the expected response of the audience to the horrific spectacle which is unfolding before their eyes. Yet again, in the lower right of the frame, a woman appears with her hands clasped in horror at what she and the audience are witnessing. Guy's scenes of the *Ecce Homo* and the bearing of the Cross, both of which are again heavily indebted to Tissot's illustrations, offer more evidence of women's responses to the spectacle of Christ's suffering—uniformly emotional and horrified—but it is on the way to Calvary where Guy's vision becomes more fully realized.

Amidst the throng which lines the *Via Dolorosa*, Guy depicts Jesus' encounter with his Mother in 'Jesus falls for the first time,' an episode which does not of course feature in the biblical narrative, but was well-known within the Catholic tradition of the 'Stations of the Cross.' If Tissot's visual influence is again unmistakable, so too are the notes which accompany his illustration of the scene:

'Mary, who had come to hear the verdict of judgment and seen the cross laid upon her son, wanted to come to him to help him. But it was impossible. The Tyropean way was too tight and already filled by the soldiers and the crowd.'<sup>24</sup> (aut. transl.)

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<sup>24</sup> J.J. Tissot, *La Vie de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ: Trois Cent Soixante-cinq Compositions D'après Les Quatre Évangiles Avec Des Notes Et Des Dessins Explicatifs* (Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1896-7). (Aut. transl.)

While Guy evokes and animates the vision of Tissot, within Guy's own filmic narrative, this is of course, not the first time Mary has been thwarted. Just as Guy's Mary is drawn away from the sleeping Jesus by her husband earlier in the film, so now Guy offers a heightened, highly dramatic—indeed melodramatic example—of Mary's maternal desire to reach out and care for Christ being thwarted by the world of men. Women continue to feature prominently in Guy's portrayals of 'Climbing Golgotha' and the 'Crucifixion,' where they dominate the foreground of Guy's scene, forming the front row of the audience as the spectacle unfolds. While men shout defiance and judgment, women support Mary and bow in worship. Indeed, when the soldier pierces Jesus' side and Mary drops to her knees with the rest of the women, it evokes the opening scene of Guy's film when Mary also drops to the ground. There she falls in the face of the male inn-keeper's rejection of the holy couple and the diminishing prospects of a place to give birth to Jesus. Here Mary and the rest of the women fall in the face of men's orchestration of the death of Christ.

In the final two scenes of the film, Guy applies the finishing touches to her portrait of Jesus and his women, first by involving them in the removal of his body from the Cross, and then by having them follow his body to the tomb. Thwarted yet again by the man, to the lower right of the frame, who prevents them from following Christ into the tomb, the women's entrance to the tomb must wait for the arrival of the angel on Sunday who greets them after the resurrection and ushers them in. Indeed, it can hardly be accidental that Guy chooses this image with which to end her film: not only is the resurrected Christ finally free from the world of men, but so too are the holy women free, free to kneel with the angels and worship around the tomb of the risen Christ who has ministered to them and been ministered to by them (Fig. 3.4).



Figure 3.4, The Holy Women kneel and worship in the Tomb.

In reflecting on Guy's vision as a whole, there is of course, something undeniably conventional about her melodramatic portrayal of the world of women: Mary leans heavily on her husband, the women of the Magi cluster close to the manger, the wife of Jairus and many other women are regularly physically overcome by their own emotions—not least as the Passion progresses. Yet, the women of the gospel according to Guy, may also be strong, thrusting their children toward Jesus for a blessing, both ministering to and being ministered to by Christ at risk of personal ridicule (the anointing woman, the Samaritan woman) or harm (Mary) and even physically resisting male antagonism toward Christ. While Guy's visual debt to Tissot has been regularly acknowledged and further illustrated here, it should be noted that even with respect to the women of her filmic gospel, Guy appears to owe something to Tissot. Even allowing for Tissot's exhaustiveness, it is clear that he did himself in fact expend extraordinary illustrative and narrative energy in documenting the women of the Gospel tradition. That this is so is suggested by his visualisation of not merely the obvious women of the canonical gospels, including the Marys and Martha, but his willingness to devote illustrations to the collective *Daughters of Jerusalem* (Lk 23:28) and to the 'Holy Women' (including illustrations entitled: *The Holy Women, Jesus Appears to the Holy Women, The Holy Women Watch from Afar* (Lk. 23:49), *Mary Magdalene and the Holy*

*Women at the Tomb, A Holy Woman Wipes the Face of Jesus*). Tissot's own interest may be attributed in part to his embracing of the traditionalism of the late nineteenth century Catholic revival in France, as well as his inclination toward spiritualism.<sup>25</sup> In such a climate, it is hardly surprising that Tissot found himself favourably disposed toward the meditations of Anne Katherine Emmerich, the mystic German nun, whose visions were to prove so enduringly popular in certain circles. Whether her visions served as the direct impetus for Tissot's *Life of Christ* or not, their influence is proved not only by his acknowledgment of them in his introduction, but also by the ways in which Emmerich's interest in the women of the gospels was visualized in Tissot's illustrations.<sup>26</sup>

Yet to reduce Guy's interests to the influences of Emmerich, Tissot and others would be to underestimate the artistic and creative novelty of *La Vie du Christ*, and the coherence of her filmic vision—a vision which offers a far more intentional, programmatic and focused exploration of the interaction between Jesus and the women of his world than anything produced by Emmerich or Tissot. Mary's rejection by the inn-keeper and rough treatment at the hands of the Roman soldier on horseback before the birth of Christ sets the tone for Guy's film: the world of men (apart from the disciples) will neither understand nor embrace Christ ministry like women will. When Mary's maternal concern for the infant is minimized by Joseph, it is female guardian angels who come to watch over him. In his mature ministry, Guy's Christ ministers to women, giving living water to the Samaritan woman, giving life

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<sup>25</sup> For a very readable, if slightly cynical, treatment of Tissot's conversion and spiritual fervour, see Michael Wentworth, *James Tissot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 174-97.

<sup>26</sup> Tissot, *The Life of our Saviour Jesus Christ*, ix. Thus, for example, Emmerich's *Dolorous Passion* (most likely consulted by Tissot in the French translation of Abbé Cazales, 1854) devotes entire chapters to: 'Mary in the House of Caiphas,' 'Pilate and his wife,' 'Mary during the Flagellation of our Lord,' 'Description of the Personal Appearance of the Blessed Virgin,' 'The Veil of Veronica,' 'The Daughters of Jerusalem,' 'The Departure of Mary and the Holy Women of Calvary,' 'The Holy Women at the Sepulchre.'

itself back to Jairus's wife in her resurrected daughter, and giving forgiveness and grace to the woman who anoints his feet. As the ministry gives way to Christ's passion, it is the turn of the women to welcome, defend and minister to their Lord as he moves toward the crucifixion and then resurrection. Indeed, it is clear that Guy's cinematic juxtaposing of Jesus' embrace of and by women with a masculine world which rejects both Christ and feminine concern was not merely unconventional for its day, but in fact, utterly unprecedented. Moreover, that she was able to produce such a vision in a nascent cinema industry still dominated by men—and in a genre whose traditionalist tendencies were evident and would soon be reasserted by her one-time assistant, Ferdinand Zecca—is nothing short of extraordinary.

A final illustration of Guy's novel adaptation of existing visual and literary traditions for her own interpretive purposes may be seen in her treatment of Veronica wiping the face of Christ—a scene which may, additionally, offer some hints as to why and for whom Guy made her film.<sup>27</sup> When Jesus pauses for a moment under the burden of the Cross, Veronica appears from the crowd and offers a white cloth to Jesus which he presses against his face, before Veronica then displays it. While the Veronica episode was well-established in the Catholic tradition and had appeared in Zecca's earlier film (1902-05), Guy daringly inserts into her conventional long shot of the scene, a medium close up shot of Veronica dolefully displaying the cloth bearing an image of the face of Jesus to the viewer (Fig. 3.5). Because it is taken against a white background, from a modern perspective, this shot stands virtually outside the diegesis. Here too, Tissot seems to have inspired Guy, for in 1896, Tissot effectively anticipated the cinematic cut-in shot, by supplementing his standard painting of

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<sup>27</sup> Bachy, "Entretiens avec Alice Guy," 40, records both Guy's pride regarding the scene and her conviction that no print of the scene had survived.

the scene with a still ‘cut-in’ of Veronica holding up the cloth with the imprint of Jesus’ face (Fig 3.6).



Figure 3.5, Veronica exhibits the image of Christ on the cloth (*La Vie du Christ*, 1906).



Caption: Figure 3.6, A Holy Woman Wipes the Face of Jesus (J.J. Tissot, *La Vie de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ*, 1896-7).

Like Tissot’s ‘Holy Woman,’ Guy’s Veronica allows Jesus to press the cloth to his face with his own hands, a detail which may well have been derived from Emmerich. For Guy (as for Emmerich and Tissot) Veronica’s actions allow for a reprisal of the

stereotypically feminine concern for the suffering Christ seen already in Mary's effort to help the fallen Jesus. But at the same time, Guy's handling of the cut-in within her scene reflects a uniquely cinematic sensibility.

Having received the cloth back from Jesus in the long shot of the scene, the actress playing Veronica holds the cloth up specifically in the direction and for the benefit of the women who are with her. Confirmation that Veronica's image of Christ is first and foremost for women (and only secondarily for the man who sees it subsequently) arrives in the final frames before the cut-in, when as the hostile male crowd turns its back on Veronica and her image of Christ, the woman to whom she displays it, clasps her hands together in pious astonishment as she gazes at the face of Christ (Fig. 3.7) before eventually bowing her head in adoration.



Caption: Figure 3.7, A woman clasps her hands in astonishment (frame right) at the sight of the image of Christ on Veronica's cloth.

By introducing the cut-in with this action, Guy constructs it as a P-O-V shot from the woman's perspective as she gazes on the face of Christ. While the cut-in undoubtedly serves

as an attraction<sup>28</sup>—a spectacle for the benefit of the viewer—it is at the same time, within the filmic narrative itself, a visual spectacle for the woman looking on. Indeed, the fact that Alice Guy makes a spectacle of Veronica’s display of her own portrait of the Christ invites further reflection, in light of Richard Abel’s tentative suggestion that Guy may have produced the film with female audiences specifically in mind.<sup>29</sup> That Veronica displays her portrait of the Christ on a white sheet is of course evocative of the cinematic image, displayed as it was so often in the shopfront cinemas on a stretched sheet of white cloth.<sup>30</sup> That Veronica displays an *image of Christ on the screen* of course invites the reading of Veronica as Guy herself, who displays her own unique image of Christ to the (first and foremost female) viewers, as Veronica does to the woman in the scene.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, if, as Robert has argued, cinematic depictions of images such as Veronica’s were likely to evoke the mystical acheiropoeitic (i.e. not made by human hands) quality of the cinematic image itself, Guy’s scene of Veronica might allow for a reading of Guy’s own cinematic image of Christ as

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<sup>28</sup> As suggested by Valentine Robert, “‘Acheiro-poïétique’ du cinéma: le Christ révélé par l’écran,” in *Jésus en représentations. De la Belle Epoque à la postmodernité*. (eds.) A. Boillat, J. Kaempfer, and P. Kaenel, (Gollion: Infolio éditions, 2011), 376. Robert’s fascinating discussion draws out the achiropoeitic (‘made without human hands’) qualities of not only this scene, but also amongst others, DeMille’s ‘miraculous’ revelation of Christ’s face to the viewer and the boy healed from blindness in *The King of Kings* (1927).

<sup>29</sup> Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*, 166.

<sup>30</sup> William Paul, “Screens,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 573-576.

<sup>31</sup> The masculine mob’s ignoring of Veronica’s image of Christ curiously presaged the fate of Guy’s *La Vie du Christ*, which was also largely ignored (for a variety of reasons) following Pathé’s release of her former assistant, Ferdinand Zecca’s own more traditional and more patriarchal “Silent Jesus” in 1907. To this injury was added the further insult of a male historian (Georges Sadoul) falsely crediting her film to her male assistant, Victorin Jasset in collaboration with her rival, Georges Hatot—a mistake subsequently corrected by Sadoul, when it was pointed out to him. See McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché*, 29, 97 and Bachy, “Entretiens.”

similarly mystically inspired. Just as Veronica's image itself is not produced by her, but impressed upon the cloth by Christ's own hands, and merely displayed by Veronica, so too, Guy only exhibits her cinematic image of Christ, which she undoubtedly saw as derived from Holy Scripture as mediated by spiritual authorities such as Tissot.

The possibility that Alice Guy intended to exhibit her own extraordinary—and indeed unique—portrait of the Christ first and foremost to women whose sensibilities she attempts to evoke throughout her film, fits comfortably with what Guy wrote about the woman's place in filmmaking several years later:

‘Theatre managers know that their appeal must be to the woman if they would succeed, and all their efforts are naturally in that direction. This being the case, what a rare opportunity is offered to women to use that inborn knowledge of just what does appeal to them to produce photodramas that will contain that inexplicable something which is necessary to the success of every stage or screen production.’<sup>32</sup>

In the same article, Guy goes on to elaborate what she sees as this ‘inborn knowledge’ possessed by women which suits them more than men to create photoplays:

‘She is an authority on the emotions. For centuries she has given them full play while man has carefully trained himself to control them. She has developed her finer feelings for generations, while being protected from the world by her male companions, and she is naturally religious.’

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<sup>32</sup> Alice Guy, “Women's place in photoplay production,” *The Moving Picture World*, Vol XXI, No. 2, July 11, 1914, 195.

While Guy's piety in later life may not have manifested itself in traditional ways, her younger view of women as 'naturally religious' is perhaps not surprising. After all, Guy's formative years were spent with her siblings in the Convent of the Sacred Heart at Viry where her models of piety were the nuns—the holy women—into whose care she had been placed by her parents. If Guy's own extraordinary feats of film pioneering vindicate the strictness of the nuns' attempts to make the girls into, in Guy's words, 'strong, accomplished women,' then perhaps Guy's vision of the women of Christ in her film and especially her final scene of the 'holy women' in the tomb, also reflect her still earlier childhood memory of Chile and the holy women of a quite different world:

'[When I went to Mass] I liked to see the beautiful Chilean women kneeling on their little mats laid directly on the ground, their arms sometimes crossed, lost in profound adoration.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Blaché, *The Memoirs*, 7.