

FILMING THE CLOISTERS

Who would have thought that films about the cloistered life should be all the rage? Or, if that is an exaggeration, at least that there is a significant audience of a kind for them? A year or two back, in *Die Grosse Stille/Into Great Silence* (2006), Philip Gröning made a 2¾-hour monument documenting life in La Grande Chartreuse, the Carthusian monastery in the French Alps; then in 2009 the Edinburgh Festival not only showed Tacita Dean's *Presentation Sisters* about the five elderly residents of a Cork convent, but also Michael Whyte's *No Greater Love* about the Carmelite nuns of the monastery of the Most Holy Trinity, tucked away in the Notting Hill area of London. Coincidentally there has just appeared a new fiction film set in a nunnery, *The Calling*.

Is it obvious what the fact of these films being made is telling us? That they chime with a renewed interest in the rigours of life in a religious community? (Christian that is – we await a documentary in the same vein about life in a Buddhist monastery) It is tempting to make a sweeping conclusion that, even as distrust in the church as an institution continues to bubble away in people, the spiritual life, if it is felt to be 'genuinely' spiritual, calls them away from the banality of their humdrum lives.

Put the fiction film, *The Calling*, on one side. Whatever its merits, or the merits for that matter of forerunners such as *Les Anges de Péché* (1943), Bresson's religiously steamy fiction about the Dominican Sisters of Bethany, *Black Narcissus* (1946), Powell & Pressburger's erotically steamy drama set in a convent in the Himalayas, Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* (1961), Rivette's *La Religieuse* (1966), Ken Russell's campily steamy *The Devils* (1971), and so on, all of which may offer us insights into human psychology (and indeed specifically female psychology since monks seem largely not to have come under the knife), yet we miss for the most part an illumination of the nature of the spiritual calling: what drew these people to the religious life in the first place? To answer that question the documentary film is much better placed, distilling hours of patient observation in a way that makes the temporal element manageable for a secular audience used to crowded hours and multi-tasking. There might be a grand narrative about a backlash against the abusive portraits of enclosed communities painted in the fiction films I've listed, but I don't really think so. I believe the answer to be a disappointingly technical one: it is the arrival of digital technology that has made the big difference. This can be illustrated with reference to another documentary about monastic life, Frederick Wiseman's *Essene* about a Benedictine community in America, but one made forty years ago in 1972. This is a very wordy, touchy-feely affair (in contrast to the silences and stillnesses of *Into Great Silence* and *No Greater*

Love), with hardly any dwelling on the manual labour which is so important to the Benedictine rule. We see brief images of leaves being swept up, of hay-baling in the fields, but that is about all, whereas the new documentaries dwell extensively on manual work – making wafers, cutting cloth, sawing wood, gardening etc. This is in part a consequence of cost. Digital film is now so much cheaper than the 16mm film Wiseman used (maybe costing £500 for ten minutes of screen time, at today's prices) that it is now feasible financially just to let the camera run. Although the pitfall is obvious, namely a tendency to let it do so unthinkingly, Michael Whyte spoke of rediscovering the need to press the start button only when, during the process of observation, he felt there was something to film, thus ensuring that the film did not flounder purposelessly. As it happens, both *Into Great Silence* and *No Greater Love* illustrate what might be achieved with patience and sensitivity before the subject, i.e. they not only document the externals of the cloistered life, silent, private, ordered, but afford some glimpse, however remote, of what it does to time by giving duration to light on surfaces and to the presence of sound, making the audience aware of both dimensions for the simple reason that in a world where silence is the rule, this is the dimension that our chattering world finds hardest to recognize, and light and sound form a substitute for words and a window onto the world of the spirit. Our silence allows God's words to be heard.

As Gröning did with *Into Great Silence*, Whyte found himself with a mass of material which has been edited down to 105 minutes. The film is beautifully structured, with the rituals of Holy Week forming a central episode of the film, with a straight transition from the Easter vigil to the sight of a dead nun lying in her coffin. After her funeral and burial, the film reasserts the daily rituals that provide stability and continuity from year to year, and very near the end, we see the profession of a new nun into the order. Since a sound tactic in documentaries is to spring surprises, the next thing we watch is her participation in a Scottish reel performed during one of the nuns' recreation times.

From these films, as opposed to the fictional features, we get a much better sense of the way religious communities engage with ritual, whether it be liturgical or manual, or the rituals of study or even the rituals of relaxation, in order to shape a life in the service of God. They shift the emphasis from speaking to not speaking, although 'not speaking' should be understood as including praying, singing, worshipping and studying. Michael Whyte thought the monastery of the Most Holy Trinity was plain as a building, but that the costumes lent themselves to 'Vermeer-like interiors', and for much of his film the human figure is central to the composition of the images. *Into Great Silence* similarly likes to dwell on figures in interiors but it is also different because Gröning exults in the mountain scenery surrounding

the Carthusian monastery and in the still life of objects. The length of the two films point up another difference: *No Greater Love* is 105 minutes, *Into Great Silence* 162 minutes. Whyte did not show the nuns engaged in reading, commenting that silent prayer looked like ‘the sister was having a nap’. Gröning had no such scruples: his film starts with a monk on his knees at prayer to the sound of flames burning wood in the stove. Outside it is snowing, and Gröning films the flakes falling on his lens, and then we see the building emerging from the lifting fog followed by some close-ups of the snow-covered buildings; at the end of the sequence we are granted a view of the whole magnificent monastic range in its alpine setting. Right from the start he wants to say that this is a film about time, and that monastic time is not our time – hence the length of the film. The difference is palpable: Whyte calls himself a low-church Anglican who is ‘emotionally spiritual’, and his engagement with the sisters is a very warm one. Gröning on the other hand seems like an unabashed Catholic (I speculate here, but that is certainly the impression the film gives), fully persuaded from the outset of the virtues of the monastic vocation.

Yet it may in fact be the case that both film-makers entered these cloistered spaces uncertain what to expect, and indeed their films are the better for it. They seek to show, not to preach: the goods are laid out on a stall for us to admire. Both films engage, in so far as they were allowed to, with the monks and nuns as individuals, and we get some insight into their motivation. Notably, *Into Great Silence* contains an interview with an elderly blind monk in which he articulates his blindness as a divine gift, and how he serves in a monastery as an expression of his love for God. Although the prioress in *No Greater Love* takes a more intellectual tack, she is no less rigorous. She comments, ‘Even if the atheists are right, I’ve lost nothing by this life of devotion. But otherwise, I’ve gained a welcome in heaven on my death.’ This sentiment, which is based on Pascal’s Wager, his blindsided argument for the existence of God, chimes in with a Jansenist crucifix we are shown, which shows Jesus’ arms not stretched out wide on the cross – as if to embrace us - but instead stretched above his head – as if to lead us upwards. Now Jansenism was the context in which Blaise Pascal exercised his theological imagination, and it is worth pointing out that the headquarters of this austere movement was Port Royal which Blaise’s sister Jacqueline entered in 1651, as if only a commitment to the cloistered rule could properly express the Christian life.

These documentaries may be seeking to reassert this truth. Even more striking is the fact that in an age of sexual permissiveness, when gossip about the private lives of public figures – whether film stars, footballers, politicians, whoever – is a staple fare of the media, there should be an audience for films about the celibate life, as if to turn the world on its

head: abandon 'If there is no sex, it is not interesting' and embrace instead 'It is interesting because there is no sex'.

NOTES

I have not seen Tacita Dean's *Presentation Sisters* (2005) but look forward to doing so (not least because I liked the reflective portrait she made in 2007 of the poet Michael Hamburger and his apples so much). The comments I've quoted from Michael Whyte were made during a showing he introduced of *No Greater Love* at Cinema City in Norwich, UK, on 16 May 2010. While this was shown in the smallest of Cinema City's three screens, the room was full and the questions afterwards showed how strongly the film had engaged the audience. Finally, story has it that when *Into Great Silence* was shown in Norwich in 2007, this time at the Norwich Playhouse because Cinema City was being refurbished at the time, for one showing the auditorium of maybe 500 seats or more was full to overflowing because members of religious communities in East Anglia came in their coachloads. I wish I'd been there to see it.

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