

MONKS THUMP 7 PAST *ZIDANE*

In praise of Die Grosse Stille/Into Great Silence

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You approach a 2¾-hour documentary film about life in a Carthusian monastery with preconceptions: you know it is long; you are sure it will feel slow; you sense that in view of the Carthusian strictness about speech, not much will be said. But it is a mark of the originality of Philip Gröning's *Die Grosse Stille/Into Great Silence* that it keeps taking you by surprise: it starts with a dimly-lit shot of a monk's face in profile and in close up, who seems to be asleep. Then we hear creaking sounds, and it turns out that the monk is at prayer, and the creaks are made as he rises and kneels and rises on the wooden floor. We hear a vague roar which turns out to be the sound of logs burning in the stove. Nor has anything prepared you for the wild beauty of the Alpine setting, that the monastery is set in the cathedral of nature. You know that the seasons would play a part in the monastic life, but you had not expected them to be so marked: at the beginning the monastery looks other-worldly nestling in heavy snow with clouds on the peaks, more Himalayas than France. But in the summer it sits in lush green, the season of growth, a high point in the cycle of life and death, birth and decay, a cycle which the monks both accommodate in their daily lives and counterpoint to the tuning of the eternal in their constant prayer and regular chant.

So, you expected repetition and cycles as the essence of monastic life, but you did not quite expect such a visual feast: the sun illumining a corridor, fabric moving in the breeze, light and shadow on wood, the stillness of the holy water in the stoup, reflecting the soft light as though it was a receptacle for it, the abstract patterns of rain on water. Every now and then Gröning inserts a shot using time-lapse photography to show clouds moving over the landscape, and the stars moving through the night sky. This is a paradox: time is compressed so that slow things rush past us, as a way of reminding us of the length of God's time.

For it is time that is at the centre of the film. Gröning shot 120 hours for a 2¾-hour film, that is a shooting ratio of 43 hours for each hour of film, or 43 minutes for each minute of film. It is a massive task to organise so much material, but such profligacy has, in the right hands, led to an essence, a distillation of the best material from this great accumulation. There are maybe 800 shots in the film and each gives an impression of being carefully chosen: by this discipline Gröning is stating his own respect for the disciplines of the monks. It is a reminder too that compelling art can be made under conditions of restraint rather than abundance, not unlike the way the spiritual life is achieved through discipline rather than freedom. Gröning had to wait fourteen years before being allowed to make the film – which allowed him to meditate on what he was trying to create – and he had to submit to some taxing demands: no artificial light, no music external to that of the monastery, no commentary and no accompanying crew. So when he finally gets to work, Gröning does the placing of the camera and its operation, and records the sound himself. Essentially, he is forced by these constraints to concentrate on images and sounds, but it is the film's triumph that he has the imagination to make this work.

One reason he achieves this is through a familiarity with the expressive capacity of film. The shot of the monks tobogganing down a far slope is a straight echo of German mountain films of the 1920s. The triads of monks' faces that punctuate the film (six sets of three, each lasting between ten and twenty seconds plus near the end a significant triad: the blind monk, an old monk on his deathbed, and the young black novice) are in effect



screen tests, made as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end, and an unexpected echo of Andy Warhol's film portraiture (eg *13 Most Beautiful Women*, *50 Fantastics* and *50 Personalities*). The time-lapse photography of the mountains echoes Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*. Gröning uses intertitles too, like in the silent cinema, and as if they were a monastic prayer he repeats them: 'Unless you give up all possessions and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.'



All this material is both free-flowing and structured, with the passage of time being marked by the seasons, by an event such as the welcoming of novices into the

community, by manual labour such as cutting cloth, sawing and splitting wood,



gardening, preparing food, collecting the dirty plates, fixing the water supply, mending shoes. And marked too by moments of release: a meeting held outside in the sun with talking allowed, and most spectacularly, taking snowshoes outside to slide down the slopes.

In particular, we expected a documentary about life in the monastery, a view behind the walls of what things looked like, what people did, and indeed we do get a lot of this – although it is striking that the most famous product of the monastery, ‘Chartreuse’ liqueur, is documented only in the extra material on the DVD rather than in the main feature, relegated to an appendix as it were. But what transforms *Die Grosse Stille* from an observational film into one seeking to replicate the spiritual abundance of monastic life is the way Gröning used sounds and uses time. In his original proposal to the monastery, made in 1984, he said, ‘Above all there is to be time’; and secondly, ‘Only in silence does hearing begin. ... This film is to be a film for the ear.’ This is flagged up in the very opening images accompanied by the creak of floorboards, the sound of snowflakes falling (listen hard . . .), the muffled roar of the fire. And the film is in fact a procession of sound: church bells and cowbells, sandals shuffling on flagstones, creaking wood, spoon on metal, scissors snipping and saws sawing, the electric razor shaving hair. There are the sounds of nature too: wind, birdsong, a raven’s croak in the mountains echoing in the pastures. But they are more than sounds: their isolation on the soundtrack means we hear them anew, for their own pleasure, as a film version of Imagism, in which each sound evokes a frisson of recognition, of pleasure in the viewer’s mind. The images create amazement but of a detached kind, while the sounds reach out to create warmth and active response: sounds travelling in air suggest not just physical space but a space in the mind. One especially brilliant extra on the DVD is a small archive of the sounds used in the film, one from each month, for example:

- June: nightbell in the great stairways
- July: bringing the meals to the cells
- November: the thunderstorm.

This gives us a clue to understanding the chanting. We expected it to figure prominently; we did not expect it to creep up on us. We hardly hear it at first, but only in

the distance as we gaze at the water in the stoup. Gradually, as if serving our own novitiate, we come face to face with it over two hours into the film, hearing it directly in worship, and being shown the music and the words in the chant books themselves. Nor is it an accident that they happen to be singing the Benedicite:

Benedicite ignis et aestus Domino: laudate et superexultate eum in saecula.

Benedicite rores et pruina Domino: laudate . . .

Benedicite gelu et frigus Domino . . . glacies et nives . . . noctes et dies . . .

lux et tenebrae . . .

[O ye Fire and Summer, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever.

O ye Dews and Frosts, bless ye the Lord etc.

O ye Frost and Cold . . . Ice and Snow . . . Night and Day . . . Light and Dark . . .]

Towards the end the absence of words is broken in a brief interview with an elderly blind monk in which he articulates how he interprets his blindness as a gift from God, and how he serves in a monastery as an expression of his love for God. The second commandment forbidding images of God because they shrink God to a finite picture is turned on its head, for the monk's words are moving, but they are not as moving and as powerful as the sequence of images that remind us, as the text in Kings c. 19, from which the title of the film comes, that God is not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the stillness. It is the images, even images in a cinema, and it is the sounds that point the way to this great stillness.

Stillness of a different kind is the aim of *Zidane: a 21st century portrait*, made by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno in 2006. On 23 April 2005, Real Madrid played Villarreal at football and won 2-0. On the Real Madrid side was one of the leading footballers of his generation, Zinédine Zidane, and in making the film, Gordon and Parreno stationed nineteen cameras around the ground with instructions to follow Zidane closely throughout the game, whether he was on the ball or not. This material was then cut together into a 90-minute film, which is the length of a football match.

The effect is initially striking, revealing as it were the loneliness of the long-distance footballer. Zidane smiles once, enough to make the event noteworthy. On the soundtrack notes are struck portentously from guitars, empty echoes in the mind. There is the occasional voice-over from Zidane himself. There is an unexpected climax too, for

towards the end he is sent off for a foul. At this point, after almost an hour and a half of sticking to Zidane through thick and thin, on the ball and off the ball, our frustration bursts into anger – in exact tune as it were with Zidane. For, despite the nineteen cameras – or because Gordon and Parreno choose not to give us any detail – we get the barest glimpse of what has happened, as if we were sitting in the back row of the upper tier of a modern superstadium, present but with the sounds and smells eliminated, leaving us only with a distant sight filtered through a television screen. The foul is Zidane's Meursault moment (see Camus' 'L'Étranger'), the film seems to suggest, strangely foreshadowing the incident in the 2006 World Cup final, when Zidane head-butted Materazzi (although in that case the incident was played and replayed on the television in gruesome close-up), but in proposing this, the film exercises its own devastating judgement on this most beautiful exponent of the beautiful game, who has travelled from the slums of Algeria to become a hero of modern France: he is capable of uncontrolled aggression, any motive for which is denied to us; his thoughts, as uttered on the subject, are as unrevealing as the rest of the film; and most culpably, by focussing on Zidane to the exclusion of the other twenty-one players on the pitch, Gordon and Parreno deny to him the gift for which he is most famous, the ability to 'read' the way everyone round him is playing the game, and thus intervene in advance, to forestall an opposing move, or to create some special opportunity for his own team.

The comparison with *Die Grosse Stille* is instructive. Both films distil a mass of material into an extended observation/contemplation of their respective subjects. Both open up to us extraordinary lives: that of the professional monk in seclusion, that of the professional footballer playing at the highest level in the full gaze of the public, yet cocooned in his own version of seclusion. *Zidane* creates a mental disturbance, *Die Grosse Stille* a mental calmness. *Zidane* reduces brilliance to emptiness; *Die Grosse Stille* celebrates the life of humans even at times to ecstasy, using the medium of contemplative cinema to achieve an end of great joy. The German *Stille* is larger than English 'stillness' because it has important overtones of calmness and silence. The English title seems to recognize this, because it is in silence, defined as an absence of sound, a falling away of sound, that the human can find in the 'solitude of the heart' a union with God. At the end, he repeats the images of the opening accompanied by the great bell and the sounds of the monks entering the chapel. Last of all is the flame of the sanctuary light filmed at night so

that it is just a pinpoint of light in the dark – from which we conjure up the presence of the divine.

Note: the DVD of the 2-disc Collector's Edition is distributed by Soda pictures Ltd (www.sodapictures.com). The complete film (162 mins) is on disc 1, while disc 2 contains various interesting extras, including 90 minutes of additional scenes.