



FAITH

IN THE AUDIOVISIBLE

INTO GREAT SILENCE AND DEVOTIONAL CINEMA

THE ACT OF PRAYER, WITHIN ALL RELIGIONS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES, OPENS A DIALOGUE, A FELT CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION, WITH SOMETHING GREATER THAN THE SELF, AND UPON WHICH THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THE SELF DEPENDS. AS MANY COMMENTATORS ON INTO GREAT SILENCE HAVE NOTICED, SMALL, MUNDANE DETAILS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE MONASTERY ARE EXPERIENCED AS INTENSELY REVELATORY EPIPHANIES

There exists a cluster of writings touching the theme of film and faith, which are not so much analyses broaching the literal question of how films engage with certain religious precepts, as texts in which the author's own faith, even if ambivalently experienced or not explicitly declared, exerts an insistent, inescapable, luminous pressure upon how they see the nature and potential of film as a medium. The example of André Bazin springs most obviously to mind, as do books like Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film: Dreyer, Bresson, Ozu*, and Robert Bresson's own *Notes On The Cinematographer*. There are likely abundant other examples of which I am presently unaware. The particular contribution to this body of writing that interests me here is Nathaniel Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema*. Linked closely to his own practice as a filmmaker, and unfolding through close readings of a handful of classic films, Dorsky makes a case for the devotional capacities of film itself, in its very materiality, which is achieved through the fine alchemical equilibrium of the contrasting elements that compose it: darkness and light, matter and the immaterial, existence and non-existence, stillness and movement, shot duration and the cut. His definition of devotion in cinema runs: "the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden, and to accept within our hearts our given situation. When film does this, when it subverts our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depths of our own reality, it opens us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world!"

What set me to pondering Dorsky's text was viewing Philip Gröning's *Into Great Silence* (Germany/ Switzerland, 2005), a 162 minute film which observes and follows the daily, seasonal and human life cycles of the Grand Priory of the

Carthusian monastic order, located in the French Alps near Grenoble (see the previous issue of *Vertigo* for an extended reflection on the film by Gröning). An enclosed order, the Carthusians follow a strict rule of silent prayer, study and physical work established in the 12th century. Through a reading of this film in light of Dorsky's ideas, I will approach, if not answer, the questions that provoked me into this writing: what does it mean to have faith, to practice devotion, and what rapports can cinema develop with these experiences?

A well-known fact about *Into Great Silence* is that Gröning first wrote a treatment for the film in 1984, but was informed by the order that they needed time to prepare for the experience. Fifteen years passed before permission to film was finally granted in 1999. As well as reflecting on the Carthusian's sense of time and purpose compared to our own hurried and ever-accelerating modern lives, I was struck by an incidental serendipity in this delay: that twelve years is an immensely long time in the evolution of film technology, and that the small, handheld high definition digital camera (24P HD) that Gröning was able to use when he eventually began shooting in 2002, gives the film a particular look and feel that serves eminently its purpose of following and illuminating the life of the order.

If right at the end of *Into Great Silence* an elderly, blind monk speaks a few, fragmentary insights into what motivated him to join the order, the interview is not and could never be the principle dynamo of the film. One of the Priory's main conditions in agreeing to participate was that there must be no direct interviews and no voice-over commentary. Although inhabiting a community with a tightly-structured daily routine, each monk lives mainly in solitude: studying, praying and working alone. There are permitted exceptions to the rule of



silence, notably the initiation of new members and outdoor recreations which allow for periods of reflective conversation. But the essence of the rule is to foster a life lived within oneself, or more precisely a life lived within oneself that nurtures and evolves a constant interaction with God. The act of prayer, within all religions and spiritual practices, opens a dialogue, a felt channel of communication, with something greater than the self, and upon which the very existence of the self depends. The fundamental attitude cultivated in prayer is thanks offered to this greater entity, which might extend into asking directly for help and support. The dialogue opened within oneself by prayer cannot fundamentally be translated or explained to others, even those who share one's beliefs. To do such is to uproot, to denature it; even to show it a lack of respect and consideration. Rereading my viewing notes, I find a recollection of some lines from Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*: that to the Japanese, using adjectives is like leaving price tags attached to gifts.

What *Into Great Silence* must therefore do, and what I think it abundantly achieves, is, without explaining, to reveal and illuminate this dialogue: its existence, its meaning and its purpose for the monks, through observing and recording the images and sounds of their daily lives. It imbues the everyday material world of the monastery with the intensity of faith; a vividness of being that comes through in a vividness of seeing and hearing, in the way the film reproduces within itself the minute care and steadfast attention that the monks devote to every activity they undertake, to every aspect of the world they inhabit. This is the condition that is achieved when prayer transcends the limits of ritual practice to infuse the entire world (while doing so only because of the

steadfast adherence to ritual practice). Everything becomes at once prayer and the answer to it. As many commentators on *Into Great Silence* have noticed, small, mundane details of everyday life in the monastery are experienced as intensely revelatory epiphanies: a sliced apple, the meniscus of dusty water in the chapel stoup, careful trimming of celery leaves away from their stalks, the fuzzy nap of the heavy white woollen fabric used to make the monks' habits, or indeed the fine hairs on the earlobe of one monk seen in breathtaking close-up (the digital camera coming into its own). Sounds in particular – the clatter of feet in stone-flagged corridors, the racket of a novice monk sawing wood and accustoming his body to the tough work – stand out in sharp relief against the rule of silence and the stripping away in the monastery of the background hum and chatter of modern existence.

Both loud and soft sounds can be heard here clearly and with equanimity: in one scene we observe a monk patiently mending the sole of a walking boot, hear the pounding of the hammer and then the gentle whisper of his breath blowing on glue to dry it. (Another recollection: the Zen revelation of Bashō's famous haiku of the frog jumping into the pond, which ends 'Oh! the sound of the water!') Further technical capabilities of the cinema – long, durational takes, subtle shifts in focus, exposure and colour balance, the textural contrast achieved by shooting some of the exteriors on Super 8 – are also used throughout the film to convey the nuances and changes that happen as the perpetual spiritual dialogue evolves, which it is doing even (because) within a pattern of living that stresses cycle, structure, constancy and repetition.

I think that there are two basic ways in which

a viewer might respond to *Into Great Silence* if reading along the lines suggested here, and which would likely depend upon the degree of his or her own receptiveness to devotion. One would be to take the visual and aural qualities of the film – beauty, variety, attentiveness, patience, persistence, simplicity, surprise, joy – as essentially metaphorical, showing us by means of the recordable, sensory world equivalents for the invisible and intangible experiences in which the monks believe.

The other response will take the leap of faith, seeing the world of the film appearing as it does whether because the environment has been transfigured by the monks' devotions, or whether because acts of devotion permit us to see the world as it truly, wonderfully, is. In either case, we might, with Dorsky, fairly acknowledge cinema as a privileged instrument for the revelation. In proposing these two interpretations I am in no way suggesting that one is superior to the other. Faith cannot be forced or persuaded upon others; at bottom it is something discovered, experienced and maintained by and within oneself; even if, as the life of the monastery amply demonstrates, we may find and inhabit communal situations that nourish and facilitate it. *Into Great Silence* mirrors the life of one such community, by respecting its rule and discovering a way to reveal its inner meaning, without ever requiring it to explain that which cannot be said.

1. Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* [2nd edition] (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005), p. 18
Into Great Silence is available in the UK from Soda Pictures (www.sodapictures.com).
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