

TIBET:

A Buddhist Trilogy



monastery, feeling closed in and suffocated by the dimly lit reds and yellows of the monks' robes, lost in the confusion of Tibetan culture and Buddhist ideology which seemed inextricably intertwined, 'A Prophecy' had for me, a strong feeling of release. I felt as though I had been let out into the sunshine and fresh air and that Buddhist ideas had been turned loose from the confines of their traditional home and exposed to the bright light of day. I

felt excited by the verbally stimulating and physically vigorous debates in the new monastery, and fascinated by the Dalai Lama's address to the monks. Exile seems to have brought him closer to his people, and there is a new spiritual and political vision. It is as though the flight from the Chinese invasion in 1959, tragic as it then seemed has brought new insights and purpose. The Dalai Lama has a strong interest in political ideologies



It took me some time to get to see these films: although they are shown increasingly frequently at the independent cinemas, they are often fully booked in advance. I really recommend people to see them on separate evenings if possible, unless their powers of concentration are highly developed. They are all, particularly Part 2 'Radiating the Fruit of Truth', very intense. Their style is graceful and unhurried, reminiscent of many of the films made in Eastern Europe and they make the often punchy style of films made for the American and Western European market, which tend to carry their audiences along with them, seem restless and urgent.

I saw Part 2 'Radiating the Fruit of Truth' first. Both I and the friend with whom I went found it difficult to relax into the tempo of the film. It is long — just over two hours — and portrays a ritual which lasted all night. By the time it was over I too felt it had been an all-nighter — not helped by the stuffiness of the ICA's unventilated studio. But it is beautifully made and astonishingly intimate. It is not hard to believe that it took Graham Coleman, who wrote and directed the films, and David Lascelles who did photography and production, four years to make the trilogy. They must have developed a very special relationship with what has hitherto been recognised as a rather private and inward looking culture. Their filming of the ritual — a Tara puja — was very detailed and it was allowed to speak for itself without interpretation. Their portrayal of 'The Beautiful Ornament' ritual gave a very strong feeling of the idea of contemplating the nature of the mind and the obstacle of the ego. I don't mean my comments in general to be a criticism; rather I fully admit my own limitations of appreciation. I did however feel that the continual subtitles were unnecessary. I am very drawn to the printed word, and if I had not felt compelled to read the translations of repetitive mantras I think I would have been able to absorb the chanting on another level, and feel a more spiritual effect from the film. The 'music' is mostly cacophonous to the western ear but that too has its power. I must add that on leaving the cinema I spoke to a friend who had just watched the film for the second time and was looking forward to seeing it again. She found it very spiritual and inspiring.

I went to see parts 1 and 3, 'A Prophecy' and 'The Field of the Senses' on the following night. 'A Prophecy' is set mainly in Dharamsala in northern India and the film follows the lives of both Tibetan monks and laypeople living in exile on land donated by the Indian government. Again there is a deliberate refusal to interpret the visual images. After spending the previous evening feeling cooped up inside a remote, crumbling and claustrophobic

which has resulted in changes in the structure of the old theocracy. He has said 'The future will lead to the rule of the masses, to a social democracy. When we look at it from this point of view, the invasion of Tibet has been something good for the Tibetans — providing we can follow the right path in the future'.

Again the filming is so calmly beautiful, I couldn't help being carried away by its sheer aesthetic excellence. Several images linger in my mind. One is of the monks in the same red and yellow robes which now seem so bright and rich in the sunshine, perched precariously high painting murals on the walls of the new monastery. Another is of the huge crowds of Tibetan people, listening in rapt attention to the Dalai Lama's address and the long file of people waiting to see their spiritual leader who pats them on the head or the cheek. But it's in no way a patronising gesture. I felt it from the back of the crowded Central Hall on his recent visit to Britain and it shone out again in the film, that this Dalai Lama is a truly loving and compassionate human being, passionately concerned with finding and exploring that 'right path'.

The third film 'The Field of the Senses' returned to the mountainous landscape of Ladakh with scenes of the traditional working and devotional lives of the monks and the lay people in the monastery and the fields. The film is concerned mainly with the ritual response to death. The scenes go back and forth between the fields where completely unmechanised work is taking place, and the monastery where the body is being prepared for burning. The chanting of the ritual prepares not only the recently dead person, but also the living for death and all its implications for the Buddhist. The film is so powerful. I think that is why the film kept returning to the workers in the fields. At dusk the body is finally committed to the flames and the film observes quietly all the while the body burns. Juices ooze from the eye sockets of the skull and the monks chant of release and freedom. The filming offers no shock tactics, no morbidity, no sentimentality. Perhaps this is the greatest tribute to the sensitivity and extraordinary achievement of these film makers.

by Gabrielle Milward

TIBET — A Buddhist Trilogy

Screenings April 1982
 Newcastle Fri/Sat April 9/10
 Chapter Arts Centre
 London Wed. April 14 Electric
 Cinema.

Friends of the Western
Buddhist Order
Monthly Newsletter
March 1982