

TIBET: A BUDDHIST TRILOGY

TRULY INDIE/Color/Video/Dolby Digital/134 Mins./Not Rated

Credits: Written and directed by Graham Coleman. Produced and photographed by David Lascelles. Edited by Pip Heywood. In Tibetan with English subtitles.

This beautifully filmed documentary, newly edited and restored from the original 1979 version, focuses on Tibetan Buddhist monks and the rituals they conduct for the betterment of all life.

Graham Coleman, the director of *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*, admits to being influenced by the films of Robert Flaherty and Frederick Wiseman, and to being inspired by the cinematic style of Kenji Mizoguchi. With an astonishing attention to detail that Mizoguchi would certainly have admired, Coleman methodically records the monastic lives of Tibetan Buddhist monks, including two significant rituals which they perform. As Wiseman might have done, the filmmaker often respects the real time in which these rituals unfold. While the documentary doesn't have a strict or imposed narrative structure, as Flaherty's films do, Coleman's ethnographic style resembles the American masters and provides a startling insider's view of the selfless devotion of the monks.

The documentary, which has three distinct parts, had a theatrical release in 1979, but was rarely screened as the filmmaker intended. In this re-cut, digitally restored version, which runs a little over two hours, the trilogy is shown in the correct order: The first part is about the Dalai Lama and the monasteries; the second centers on a ritual celebrating the goddess Tara; and the third is a fascinating but difficult-to-witness ritual for the dead in which the monks recite from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. All three parts are skillfully narrated and subtitled, and the documentary is sublimely conceived and photographed.

In capturing the constrained beauty of the monastery and the contrastingly sumptuous hues of the monks' dress and their sand paintings, Coleman reflects the duality that informs both monastic life and the tantric traditions that lie at the root of Tibetan Buddhism. In the rituals, too, especially in the devotion to Tara, there are the monks' restraint, the precision of chant, and the contrasting eroticism of the goddess' tale. It is an onerous task to watch these rituals or any ritual in which one is not participating, especially because of Coleman's attention to detail and his penchant for real-time depictions. However, to illustrate the intricate Buddhist belief system and the fact that much of it is embedded only in memorized recitation, the filmmaker is compelled to make the rituals a "firsthand" experience for the audience. Explaining them would prove even more burdensome.

While Coleman's aim was to have his audience be a witness to the rituals, the rapture will probably escape the average Westerner. Regardless, the death ritual which the monks perform for a man in their village in the last part of the film is, in a macabre way, absolutely riveting. The burning body is not easy to watch—Coleman's camera remains unblinkingly on the pyre—but it is essential to understanding the transformation the monks, in their chant, celebrate and guide, and what they, in their minds *see*. Fire is the picture of transformation. Throughout the documentary, in fact, Coleman provides us with pictures in order to have us experience the visualization that is an essential part of the rituals. In this last sequence, perhaps because the ritual lies at the core of what we all wish to believe—that we will move on to yet another life—the picture possesses a particular magnetism and poetry.

Like the circumnavigation of the faithful around the giant stupa, through Coleman's pictures, through *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*, we experience the connection between practice and belief. The

pictures from life—the monks at their daily tasks, the monastery, the sand painting—and the pictures inspired by the visualization of the monks—the inserted painting of Tara during that ritual and the burning face of the old man during the death chant—achieve a union of art and spirituality that is actually a form of devotion. Coleman so perfectly merges form with content, the immaterial with the material, that he organically, and quite radiantly, illustrates the very essence of Tibetan Buddhism.

—Maria Garcia