

Tibet film a remarkable achievement

By Fred Haeseker

(Herald staff writer)

The greatest danger in making a film about a culture radically different from our own is in the point of view so often forced upon us. We catch tantalizing glimpses but have no chance to form our own impressions.

In *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*, the young British film-maker Graham Coleman has avoided the problem of interpretation by dispensing with the narrator altogether and confining the commentary to subtitles.

As he explained in an interview, "We felt a responsibility to present the material as it is, and not through the veil of our own understanding — or misunderstanding."

TIBET: A BUDDHIST TRILOGY, a documentary written and directed by Graham Coleman. Plaza, general; one showing daily tonight, Friday and Sunday only.

Letting the images and sound speak for themselves is a big gamble in a three-part, four-hour documentary about a subject infinitely exotic to Western eyes, but it pays off. The films work by immersion, and while we may remain mystified about any number of details, we gain a strong feeling for the essence of Tibetan culture — which, in any case, cannot be described in conventional Western terms.

The first section (*A Prophecy*) looks at the Tibetan society

exiled since the Chinese invasion of 1959 in settlement camps donated by the government of India. Here the Dalai Lama has introduced to his 100,000 followers a communal way of life based on methods derived from Marx and Gandhi combined with the traditional Buddhist teachings; the spiritual vision remains at the centre.

Part two, *The Fields of the Senses*, filmed in the mountain landscape of Ladakh, follows a group of monks and farmers through a day and records the monastery's response to a death in the community. The ritual cremation is conducted according to the *Book of the Dead*.

The third section, *Radiating the Fruit of Truth*, is the longest

(two hours), the most difficult and at the same time perhaps the most rewarding.

Filmed at the Phulwary Sakya monastery by the Great Stupa in Baudhanath, Nepal, it shows a second-century ritual of purification known as *A Beautiful Ornament*: The monks create a beautifully detailed representation of the physical universe — a cosmogram — and proceed through a night-long cycle of meditation and prayer.

The chanting (accompanied by horns and punctuated by drums, finger-snapping and hand-clapping) has a powerful mesmerizing effect, reinforced by the camera's lingering on the rich details of the monastery's interior. We must absorb what

we see and hear without assistance: The subtitles — like "the gentle bliss of insight is actualized" — reflect the inadequacy of words to describe mystical experience. The film is best comprehended on a level that does not search for logic.

Coleman has talked of his dissatisfaction with Western theatrical material, confined, in his words, to "dramatization of psychological confusion and unhappiness"; his purpose is to inspire audiences. In its technique of immersion *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy* is a very Eastern work, an incomparable introduction to a culture that has for thousands of years pursued a path to wisdom largely ignored in the West. †