

Tibet movies achieve rare cultural glimpse

"Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy," three documentaries about modern Tibetan society and culture. Written and directed by Graham Coleman. At 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Neptune Theater. No rating; suitable for general audiences.

by John Hartl
Times film reviewer

Few directors have attempted to capture a spiritual experience on celluloid. It's supposed to be one of things movies can't do, like photographing the process of human thought or showing how an artist creates.

Nevertheless, Michael Coleman's four-hour "Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy" is more than a noble attempt. It successfully immerses you in another culture, another way of thinking and being, and Coleman does it largely by not interpreting or, as he says, "misunderstanding," what he sees.

The first section deals with the Dalai Lama, the second with a day in the life of monks and farmers, including a cremation ceremony that would be difficult to watch if it weren't presented in such a positive, philosophical context. The two-hour conclusion is a study of practices in a Buddhist monastery.

At times you may be bored, at other times mesmerized. You may find yourself nodding off even when you're intrigued by an exotic ritual or the visual context of a subtitle such as "the gentle bliss of insight is actualized." But you're not likely to shake off the feeling that you're experiencing an honest attempt to use film to capture something you thought couldn't be captured.

Coleman, who is 33 and British, was brought up in Egypt by an archaeologist father. During a visit to Seattle this week, he said he always has felt the influence of the Egyptian environment.

"It was a monument to a society whose art and ritual was the basis of that society," he said.

At college in England, he became disillusioned with theatrical material that seemed to be about "images of emotional confrontation, dramatization of psychological confusion and unhappiness.

"The lack of a medium that tried to give an audience meaning became disheartening. I wanted to make transformative art instead of feeding placebos. People look for different kinds of distractions for creating ease; even relationships and jobs become transitory entertainments. I wanted to inspire audiences, to cultivate a richer perception of things."

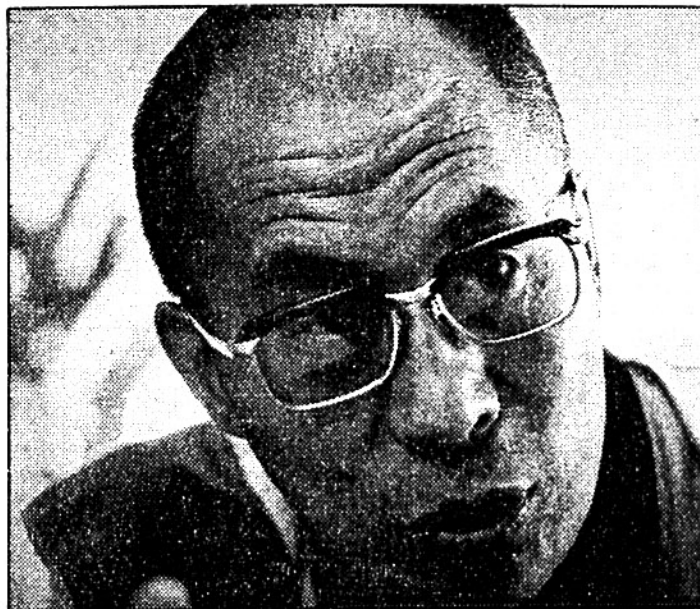
Coleman went to India in the mid-1970s and began work on the trilogy, which took four years of preparation, including a long period of working closely with Tibetan scholars and establishing an understanding of the culture. He began to think that film could express what he was feeling.

"The monks sweep away confusion through their rituals," he said. "They have a peaceful, settled presence. Film is a miracle. If a person has that resonance in life, it's still there on film. Celluloid is extremely honest."

Coleman doesn't think any established Western artist would be able to communicate the quality he wanted. However, he did single out Shakespeare for being a "completely unclouded, reflective mirror on the human context and the human mind. Every line reveals truth and confusion at the same time. He has an unbiased way of seeing things."

He feels that "in film, not many people have adopted a similar approach," though he admires the Japanese filmmakers Nagasi Oshima ("In the Realm of the Senses") and Kenji Mizoguchi ("Ugetsu") for the same reasons.

Later this year, Coleman plans to direct a documentary-style film for television about the life of the Buddha. Although he made the Tibetan films as "a reaction to the



The Dalai Lama in 'Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy'

flatness of TV documentaries, of an Everyman holding your hand and explaining things" (they've never been on TV), he hopes the Buddha film will escape the restrictions of television.