

Silence, Simplicity and Sacredness

Buddhist and Catholic monasticism
in contemporary film

WAI KIT OW YEONG



The Monastery on the Lake; photo, Wikimedia Commons.

Is silence merely the absence of sound, or can it be something more – an experience of the ineffable; a quest for the source, the depths, and the heart of life itself? For a person of the secular world, silence can be disconcerting or even alarming: silence is an absence, an emptiness that appears to negate the presence of life. But for a member of a monastic community, that very absence and emptiness allows God or the Absolute to enter, unlocking the confines of the self, permitting the access of transcendent truths and expanding one's interior world through quiet contemplation. Silence, in monasticism, thus paradoxically constitutes both emptiness and fulfilment, presenting an enigma for secular readers of texts that depict monasticism in the modern age. Can modern depictions of monasticism, of different religious traditions, provide an avenue for these paradoxes to be negotiated?

Wai Kit Ow Yeong is a graduate student from the Department of English Language and Literature at University College London.

Contemporary film, which has eagerly engaged with the theme of monastic silence in both Buddhist and Catholic religious traditions, might provide an answer: consider *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003) by the Korean filmmaker Kim Ki Duk,¹ and the German director and screenwriter Philip Gröning's *Into Great Silence* (2005)².

Silence, in monasticism, thus paradoxically constitutes both emptiness and fulfilment

By immersing audiences in the sacred hush of monastic life, both films aid viewers' appreciation of the inner peace and stillness that remains at the core of spirituality. Despite the apparent differences between *Spring and Silence* – the former focuses on a Buddhist monastery and the latter a Catholic one – both films share a common emphasis on the monastic life as a means of radical spiritual renewal, thus promoting the possibility of an interreligious understanding of monasticism. By relying on strategic cinematic techniques, both films do not simply depict monasteries – their qualities of simplicity and silence are incorporated and emblemized to become stylistic features of the films themselves. The films, then, offer opportunities for meditation rather than entertainment, and like the Buddhist and Catholic monasteries they depict, unapologetically, foreground the contemplative life as a process of purification and transformation which liberates the individual from the briar patch of the secular world.

SPIRITUALITY AND SIMPLICITY

Although the two films are grounded in different religious traditions, and fall under different genres – *Silence* is a documentary film, while *Spring* is a fictional narrative – they both feature a detailed exploration of the daily rigors demanded by monastic life.³ At one level, the films starkly reveal how monasticism can be harder than the secular life: contemplative orders tend to enforce some form of abstinence, with none of the comforts and conveniences of modernity available. The tiny Buddhist monastery in *Spring* has only the barest furnishings, floating on a raft in the middle of a lake (Fig. 1), with the lake itself surrounded on all sides by forest and ravines. In *Silence*, featuring a Carthusian monastery in the Grande Chartreuse of the French Alps, the monks lead a similarly Spartan existence. Each has their own individual

The films, then, offer opportunities for meditation rather than entertainment

cell, and they subsist on a diet consisting largely of dry bread, gruel, and vegetables – the camera zooms in to allow the viewer to observe these petty details of everyday life.⁴ The monks lead a pared-down existence, bound to strict vows, committing themselves to living the lives of hermits with almost no contact with the outside world. Even opportunities of meeting each other are minimized, as is evident during mealtimes on most days of the week, when meals are delivered to a small hatch at the side of each cell,

so that food may be passed in and out of the cell without the hermit having to meet the server. Twice in the film, the camera follows a monk who wheels the meals to each hatch, capturing the process of the monk who repeats the same action of unlocking the hatch, placing the food in, and locking the hatch, before moving on to the next hatch. Each monk receives his food in silence; one entire scene involves a monk giving thanks and crossing himself before quietly munching on his baguette, in the silence and solitude of his cell.⁵ At first glance, such austerity appears to be little more than yet another form of sensory deprivation, denying individuals the right to live freely.

the monastic life reflects a simple beauty which is sustained by its unceasing rhythms of work, prayer, and meditation

Yet at a deeper level, it is precisely because the Carthusian monks are not living in the secular world that they are better able to live freely – they avoid the sensory overload that often plagues much of the modern world, and thus life becomes clearer and sharper for them. In the religious life, there is little need to worry about the mundane trivialities of secular life, involving questions like what clothes to wear for the day or what to eat for lunch, simply because one wears the same habit and eats mostly the same food every day. Cutting out the excess cultivates a sense of simplicity, and it is this simplicity

that is essential for the spiritual life. In the first segment of *Spring*, the daily routine rarely changes: every morning, the elderly monk rises, wakes his young novice, bows and prays to the Buddha, and knocks on a hollow bowl that emits a resonant drum-like-beat into the forest.⁶ The pulsing rhythm of the drum-beat echoes the rhythmical daily routine of the monks, thus communicating the idea, metaphorically, that the monastic life reflects a simple beauty which is sustained by its unceasing rhythms of work, prayer, and meditation.

living in the secular world may be easier on the body, but harder on the soul

The quest for simplicity is also manifested even in the physical appearance of the monks. Carthusian monks, like Buddhist monks, shave their heads completely – in *Silence*, a black postulant has his head shaved, and with each lock of hair removed, a fragment of his worldly self is renounced.⁷ The tonsure represents the abandonment of vanity; in other words, it is a form of *kenosis*, an inner act of emptying the ego, but an act that is still physically manifested. In *Spring*, the elderly Buddhist monk is similarly tonsured, whereas his disciple (who had left the monastery in pursuit of his love-interest) returns with a full head of hair, but also with a host of secular problems – in particular, the disciple is wanted for the murder of his wife (who, in turn, had committed adultery). To signal his commitment to return to his master, the disciple takes a knife to cut

his own hair off,⁸ indicating his determination to leave the secular world. For all of its drawbacks, the religious life offers protection from the pains of secular existence: living in the secular world may be easier on the body, but harder on the soul, because the complexity and chaos of worldly affairs make any kind of spiritual progress in the secular sphere difficult.

SIMPLICITY AND STYLE

Strikingly, both *Spring* and *Silence* serve to demonstrate the importance of simplicity in the religious life not merely by describing it, but by embodying it as a stylistic feature of the films. As Roger Ebert has pointed out, the plot of *Spring* is reduced to only the most essential details, and most segments of the film have little or no dialogue, no explanations, and certainly no long speeches with moral messages.⁹ There is also a simple and straightforward clarity in Kim's division of the film into five segments, each labelled with the name of a

the film hints that the cycle will repeat: the process of innocence, degeneration, repentance, and rebirth continues

season (indicated by *hangul* characters), representing a particular stage of human life, and each incorporating a different animal (a dog, rooster, cat, and snake) as a motif for each section.¹⁰ Opening with 'Spring', the young novice dwells in rustic innocence, but one day takes to tying pebbles to small animals to amuse

himself, chuckling as he watches the creatures struggle to move. The elderly monk, observing this, ties a stone to his pupil's back, and instructs him to find the animals he tied up and to free them from their burdens. When the boy discovers the bloody carcass of a snake he played with, he bursts into tears: he has tasted guilt and loss, losing the moral innocence of his early childhood. The sorrow of the novice thus partially echoes sentiments in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring and Fall",¹¹ which describes the grief of a young child:

*Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?*¹²

The fallen leaves, like the dead animals in the film, present an image of afflicted nature, damaged by the sin that humanity has committed. The 'fall' described is thus not merely the falling of leaves and other signs of nature's decline, but of the state of mankind itself; the doctrine of original sin means that the descendants of Adam and Eve are infected with "the blight man was born for".¹³ In *Spring*, there is no concept of original sin, but there is the possibility of spiritual renewal. After the segment of 'Summer', when the novice experiences the thrills of sexual desire and the agony of craving, as well as "Autumn", when he struggles with the complex emotions of fear and rage, it is in "Winter" that he braves the bitter cold of nature to cross the Korean mountains, undergoing a process of repentance and self-



The Monastery in the Mountains; photo, Wikimedia Commons.

forgiveness. As “Spring” comes around once again, a new young novice arrives at the temple, and the film hints that the cycle will repeat: the process of innocence, degeneration, repentance, and rebirth continues. By framing the tale as part of a cyclical process, the narrative is rendered as a timeless fable, expressing the quality of simplicity that the film foregrounds.

If Kim integrates the quality of simplicity into the film through strategic structural division, Gröning pushes the defining boundaries of a documentary even further by radically employing silence as its dominant motif. Subverting the conventions of most documentaries, the film involves no background music,

no artificial lighting, and no explanatory voiceover or narration. Silence, then, functions as a means to focus viewers’ attention on the film’s most elemental components – space, time, and light, with each of these elements combining with the others to weave an enthrallingly expressive chronicle of spirituality. Even at the beginning of the film, the geographical isolation of the monastery is continuously emphasised with picturesque vistas of the surrounding landscape

By offering wordless depictions of the monastery, the film transcends the limitations of language, which is significant given that language can never be a wholly adequate means to express

the full richness of spiritual reality. As a means of communication, language is dependent on the naming and defining of objects, persons, and events within codified descriptions, but this means that ideological boundaries can be easily imposed upon a reality that lies in excess of such limitations. Even the use of music can condition the viewer to be inclined towards certain interpretations rather than others; consider the different effects that an upbeat melody, as opposed to a subdued and restrained tune, will have upon an audience watching the same visual image. Only silence ensures that an audience can directly bear witness to monastic life without the potential biases that may follow from an adherence to structures of meaning like language or music. Silence thus encourages viewers to form their own conclusions, free of the ideological limitations that language usually brings, hence allowing for a deeper reflection about life in the monastery as it actually is.

Only silence ensures that an audience can directly bear witness to monastic life without the potential biases that may follow from an adherence to structures of meaning like language or music.

In particular, the film inspires quiet meditation about the simple images it employs, ranging from the seemingly trivial and banal (such as an elderly monk shoveling snow) to the sacred and holy (like the monks' chanting

and prayers).¹⁴ The repetition of images (for instance, the ringing of the bells in the church)¹⁵ further reflects the reiterative nature of the activities that the monks' schedules feature, lending viewers a glimpse into the constantly recurring events of the monastery. The lives of the monks have hardly changed since the time of Matthew Arnold, who describes the Carthusian monastery and its inhabitants in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" (1855):¹⁶

*The silent courts where, night and day,
Into their stone-carved basins cold
The splashing icy fountains play;
The humid corridors behold,
Where, ghostlike in the deepening night,
Cowed forms brush by in gleaming white.*¹⁷

Arnold's nineteenth-century description of the monastery could well be applied to the same institution in the twenty-first century: the film reveals how the "silent courts"¹⁸ remain indomitably soundless, and furthermore, the depiction of the monks at some instances of the film do appear to be like ethereal phantoms; they are "Cowed forms"¹⁹ that are "ghostlike",²⁰ and which "brush by in gleaming white".²¹ Aside from the physical description of the monks, the geographical isolation of the monastery in *Silence* is also continuously emphasized with picturesque vistas of the surrounding landscape. The Carthusian monastery resembles, as the poet describes, "A palace of the kings of France",²² being located in the postcard-perfect Chartreuse Mountains that are still breath-taking in their beauty.

Similarly, the drama of *Spring* is entirely set either on or near the Buddhist monastery, which floats on a raft in the middle of a great and beautiful lake. The audience partakes of the same experience of beauty and silence, and partakes of it by necessity, simply because the film provides no other option. Each image in *Silence* and *Spring* becomes an aid to contemplation for the audience, enacting the human quest for an appreciation of nature and a desire for transcendence, while preserving the rituals and traditions handed down for generations, according to the same rhythms of work and prayer that have sustained the monastic community for millennia.

SPEECH AND SPIRITUALITY

Despite – or in fact due to – the emphasis placed upon silence, the attention of audiences is drawn towards sections of the films where human voices continue to be heard or words continue to be seen. In *Silence*, the religious service in the church reverberates with a spiritual resonance; it is the subordination of the individual to the formal and communal, in which believers partake in a ceremony that unifies them as a community down the ages, across space and time. Similarly, in *Spring*, it is the text of the *Heart Sutra* – one of the most renowned of Buddhist scriptures²³ – that functions as a unifying force for the elderly monk, his disciple, and the two detectives who have come to arrest the disciple. All of them help to contribute to the carving, painting, and coloring of the text onto the wooden floorboard of the monastery,²⁴ and

underlying this act of inscription is not only a process of atonement for the disciple, but an opportunity for all four individuals to defuse the animosity between them by cultivating the inner peace that the *sutra* advocates. The elderly monk's trust in the scripture thus reveals an inner commitment to the

The audience partakes of the same experience of beauty and silence, and partakes of it by necessity, simply because the film provides no other option.

written word as a means to understand the external world; it is a conviction that words themselves can be the conductors of great and potent energy. In *Silence*, such words include the many scriptural quotations interspersed between scenes in the film; one French quotation in particular is repeated four times:²⁵

Qui ne renonce pas à tous ses biens et ne marche pas à ma suite, ne peut être mon disciple.

Whoever does not renounce all that he has and follow me, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

By the force of repetition, Gröning obliges viewers to practice their own *lectio divina* of the scriptural passages, compelling a renewed understanding of the verses in relation to the monks' chosen path of renunciation and obedience.

Proust has called reading a “fruitful miracle of communication in the midst of solitude”²⁶: when reading, we are alone and yet together, because although we read individually, we partake in the same ideas expressed in the texts we read, establishing us as part of a literary community. In a sense, the monastic experience mirrors the process of reading, as the monks are alone and yet together, for although they dwell in solitude, they remain part of a contemplative community that has retained its dignity and steadfastness to remain separate from worldly, secular life.

In both films, a calm and tranquil monastic sanctuary provides humanity a precious chance to seek the experience of spiritual transcendence. The monastic urge, after all, is the impulse for contemplation, the desire to seek refuge, look inwards, and become still. As one of the taglines for *Silence* describes, “Only in complete silence, one starts to hear.”²⁷ This apparent paradox resolves itself to the viewer when the films demonstrate the power of silence in igniting a renewed awareness of reality, simply because any limiting ideological structures imposed by language are negated through the sheer absence of speech and sound. The monasteries in the films are thus sites where silence translates as sound, material poverty as spiritual richness, and emptiness as inner plenitude. These paradoxes are necessarily legitimized and enacted by monasticism, revealing the ways in which monastic experience can potentially transcend reason to attain higher spiritual truths. Just as monasticism promises material

poverty but spiritual riches, depictions of monasticism in film offer viewers the opportunity to gain a keener appreciation of the ways in which self-abnegation results in a counter-intuitive fulfillment of the spirit: as the self becomes less, it becomes more.

The monasteries in the films are thus sites where silence translates as sound, material poverty as spiritual richness, and emptiness as inner plenitude.

Silence, as the films illustrate, seems to function as an existential condition in religious life, whatever one’s faith tradition. Wittgenstein famously notes that what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence,²⁸ and indeed, our reality is constituted by the words that we have for that reality. So in a world like the Carthusian monastery in *Silence*, or the Buddhist monastery in *Spring*, the very linguistic and cognitive structures by which we understand that world may be accordingly dismantled. With silence, are we wiping the slate clean, making it possible to re-conceptualize reality in new kinds of ways that are not bound and contained by words? Or is our interpretation of silence dependent on previous conditioning? While the religious life does not hold a monopoly on silence, the Buddhist and Catholic traditions offer us an interpretation of silence that ennobles and sanctifies it, promoting it as an aid to contemplation in the pursuit of transcendence.

NOTES

¹ *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring*, directed by Kim Ki Duk (2003; Seoul: Korea Pictures, 2003), DVD. All references henceforth will be abbreviated as Kim, *Spring* (2003).

² *Into Great Silence*, directed by Philip Gröning (2005; New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005), DVD. All references henceforth will be abbreviated as Gröning, *Silence* (2003).

³ In 1984, German filmmaker Philip Gröning wrote to seek permission from the Carthusian monks to make a documentary about them, and was only granted permission sixteen years later. Gröning then lived in the monks' quarters for six months filming their daily prayers, tasks, and rituals. See *Silence* (2003).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kim, *Spring* (2003).

⁷ Gröning, *Silence* (2005).

⁸ Kim, *Spring* (2003).

⁹ Roger Ebert, *Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews 1967-2007* (Missouri: Andrews McMeel, 2007), 722.

¹⁰ Kim, *Spring* (2003).

¹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spring and Fall," *Bartleby* (accessed 29 January 2013); available from <http://www.bartleby.com/122/31.html>.

¹² *Ibid.*, l.1-4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, l.14.

¹⁴ Gröning, *Silence* (2005).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," *Bartleby* (accessed 29 January 2013); available from <http://www.bartleby.com/270/4/63.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 31-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, l. 36.

²² *Ibid.*, l. 24.

²³ Donald S. Lopez Jr., "Inscribing the Bodhisattva's Speech: On the 'Heart Sutra's' Mantra," *History of Religions* 29 (1990), 351.

²⁴ Kim, *Spring* (2003).

²⁵ Gröning, *Silence* (2005).

²⁶ Marcel Proust, *On Reading* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 31.

²⁷ Gröning, *Silence* (2005).

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (accessed 29 January 2013); available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnold, Matthew. "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse." *Bartleby* (accessed 29 January 2013); available from <http://www.bartleby.com/270/4/63.html>.

Ebert, Roger. *Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews 1967-2007*. Missouri: Andrews McMeel, 2007.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "Spring and Fall." *Bartleby* (accessed 29 January 2013); available from <http://www.bartleby.com/122/31.html>.

Into Great Silence. Directed by Philip Gröning. 2005. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005. DVD.

Lopez, Donald S., Jr., "Inscribing the Bodhisattva's Speech: On the 'Heart Sutra's' Mantra," *History of Religions* 29 (1990), 351-72.

Proust, Marcel. *On Reading*. London: Macmillan, 1972.

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring. Directed by Kim Ki Duk. 2003. Seoul: Korea Pictures, 2003. DVD.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "Ludwig Wittgenstein," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (accessed 29 January 2013); available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein>.