Margaret Westcott's **Behind the Veil: Nuns**

Half-a-dozen years ago, Diane Letourneau directed an unpretentious documentary on a congregation of Catholic nuns in Sherbrooke, Que. A Prima production, it was a modest, unpretentious, yet eloquent film. It was a box-office hit at the Cannes Film Festival, and subsequently was hailed far and near for its wisdom, insight, and humanity. Above all, for accomplishing something extremely difficult in documentary filmmaking: By maintaining a clear critical attitude, and reflecting what might be termed an ambiguous sensitivity typical of Quebec today, Letourneau left no doubt as to the what we now call sexist attitudes and mores underlying the way of life of a group of women. For in those specific raison d'être it is to keep house and serve as nuns (so to speak) for the priests of their diocese. On the other hand, however, she succeeded in never once talking down to her audience nor exploiting the subjects of her film. The women, in their humour, warmth, and generosity, emerged as genuinely sympathetic and admirable human beings; one vaguely understood why they did what they did, in their religious motivation, and the richness that this brought to their lives.

The film worked beautifully, scoring clear and significant points from a feminist perspective (whether that was its avowed intention or not) precisely, one could claim, because it was so fair, disciplined, and profoundly respectful of the complexities of the human situation. It was the kind of film that anyone interested in women's history, feminism, or the human condition would enjoy. It was a film that all Canadians, and all human beings, should see.

Behind the Veil tackles an incredibly ambitious and relevant topic - the history of nuns in the Catholic Church in Canada - and in so doing it provides a fascinating and informative overview of the role of nuns in the history of the Church. The film begins with a brief introduction to the history of nuns in the Church, and then proceeds to show the lives of a number of different nuns, each of whom is interviewed by the filmmaker. The interviews are conducted in a variety of settings, including the nuns' homes, convents, and churches.

One might be tempted to see Behind the Veil as simply another documentary about nuns. But that would be a mistake. Behind the Veil is more than that. It is a film that challenges the conventional wisdom about nuns, and offers a fresh perspective on their role in the Church. It is a film that encourages us to think about the history of nuns in the Church, and to consider the role that they have played in shaping the Church's history.

The film is a powerful meditation on the role of nuns in the Church, and on the way that the Church has treated them over the years. It is a film that is both informative and moving, and it is a film that is well worth seeing.
to doubt every statement made by the narrator. Inevitably, certain other worrisome considerations begin the surface.

For example: what about the nuns? The film is Canadian, put out by that very bastion of Canadian cultural affirmation, the NFB. Now, nuns do exist in Canada (half of whose population is Roman Catholic). Why are there no Canadians among the women interviewed, but only Americans, and the one Irish woman considered? Yet none was found for this film. Could it be, the by-now-antagonistic critic suspects, that no Canadian could be found who suited the demands of the pre-ordained thesis/idea of the filmmakers; or even that certain exemplary spokespersons from within this country were deliberately ignored?

Correction. There are Canadian nuns visible, the French-Canadian contemplatives from near Montreal. The images chosen of them are devastating, given the context created by the commentary. One feels these women have been abused, as we see "them"—is it "real" or is it one of the unidentified movie-clips—prostrate themselves before bishops, etc., to illustrate the film's thesis of Church male domination. Here indeed (if I may digress) is a perfect example of one of the film's tactics: it scores a point, but the reality captured in such moments is often lost, sacrificed to the whole advertising enterprise: partial truths often covering the big lie.

Others use the media very differently. Rossellini and Renoir had their own definite ideas, but these ideas tended to become more and more nuanced, emerging as they did from the complex reality of their cameras captured. The human condition, its contradictions and messy lack of precision, comes first in their work: people have more value than the idea. Canada's direct cinema is rich in this tradition. And Diane Letourneau's "Les Servantes du Bon Dieu" serves as a marvelous example of a film whose director respected, and, yes, loved the people (nuns) she studied. It is worth repeating that only made the critical attitude to the film that much more reliable and convincing.

Studio D is to be congratulated for tackling an important issue with the making of "Behind the Veil." Certain considerations raised (and blessed St. Bridget among them!) make many of us read history with a different eye. And the question (be it of women's status in general or of women in the Church in particular) has been brought to the fore in a different context. In all of this, the movie has served its purpose, and that is no small achievement.

But the final critical assessment is far less enthusiastic. Is the use of the media in the fashion outlined above tolerable in our society? Had "Behind the Veil" yielded less to the manipulative media temptation and better respected the complexity of the human situation, it would have served its purpose far more effectively. Both the subject matter of this movie, and really, the documentary film medium as a whole, deserve different treatment.

Marc Gervais

**FILM REVIEWS**

**BEHIND THE VEIL**
Director: Diane Letourneau
Producers: Diane Letourneau, Claire Stevens
Camera: Rosemary Shapley, Claire Stevens
Editor: Claire Stevens
Sound: Claire Stevens, Wolf Koegel
Mus.: Susan Tow, Rosemary Shapley
Distributor: National Film Board of Canada

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