



10-1-2007

Silent Light (Stellet licht)

Greg Watkins

Stanford University, gwatkins@stanford.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Watkins, Greg (2007) "Silent Light (Stellet licht)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.11.02.13>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11/iss2/13>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Silent Light (Stellet licht)

Abstract

This is a review of *Silent Night (Stellet Licht)* (2007)

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Winner of the Jury Prize at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, *Silent Light*, is director Carlos Reygadas' third feature film. Set in a Mennonite community in rural Mexico, near the Texas border, the film tells a 'forbidden love' story when a married Mennonite man falls in love with another Mennonite woman. Given the religious community in which it is set, the movie deals with many explicitly religious themes, as the lead character, Johan, struggles to hold his family together despite a powerful love for another woman. The storyline takes up themes of love, temptation, and forgiveness. The action of the narrative also includes a kind of resurrection – a fantastical break from the otherwise penetrating realism of the film, to be discussed more below. In short, the film is worthy of careful study from the perspective of religion and film, and I recommend its use in the classroom when exploring closed religious communities, religious ethnography, or themes of love and forgiveness in a religious context.

The occasion for writing this review came when I attended a screening of the film with the director in attendance to answer questions. I thought it would be helpful to list in the form of notes both interesting information gathered from the post-screening comments and some of my own reactions to the film. Reygadas is an incredibly talented, self-taught director, and I highly recommend all of his work.

Production notes:

The film uses no professional actors. Reygadas believes the skill of acting was developed in, and is best used for, the theater. All of the actors in this film are members of the Mennonite community in Mexico, with the exception of the two lead women. Reygadas's search for the lead women led him to Mennonite communities in Canada and Germany. The actress playing the wife is from Manitoba, and the actress playing the mistress is from Germany. Reygadas commented on the crucial importance of casting, especially when using non-professionals. In the case of non-professionals, it is the very look and personality of the person that must be right for the part.

Reygadas took a good two years to get to know the Mennonite community and to gain the trust needed to shoot there. The Mennonites of this conservative community forbid television and radio but were attracted to the idea of a movie being made in their community, in part out of growing concern for the preservation of their culture and language.

The movie is shot entirely in the language of Plautdietsch, or Mennonite Low German, a fading language with about 300,000 speakers worldwide. Only the lead male actor knew enough Spanish to act as translator between the director and all of the other actors. Reygadas says he wrote the script – after much research – in two or three days and would have the actors learn their lines on the set by way of a translator.

Reygadas is a big fan of production sound. In marked distinction to mainstream movies, all of the sound heard in this film was recorded during the take ("production sound") or otherwise on the set ("wild sound"). There is no dialogue replacement, Foley sound, or imported sound effects.

Notes on interpreting the film:

Reygadas said in his comments that he was particularly attracted to setting the telling of this kind of story (the story of, as he put it, one love dying and a new one being found) in a Mennonite community because it would give the story a fairytale-like character. The homogeneity of the community allowed him to avoid having to make decisions about the occupation, social status, etc., of the characters, compared, for example, to the telling of a similar story set in a modern urban environment. Indeed, there is a sense of purity and archetypal power that the movie has as a result of this setting.

However, the plot takes an actual fairytale turn at the very end when the wife, having died from a broken heart, is revived by a kiss and a tear from the mistress. This plot point is simultaneously intriguing and frustrating. There is, until this point, a powerful sense of human spiritual striving in the face of both natural forces and societal restrictions. In my opinion, the fairytale turn makes light of any

real spiritual progress the audience or characters might have been making, but it is a provocative choice that is sure to encourage a lot of thought and discussion.

In his comments after the screening, Reygadas emphasized that the awakening of the wife from death is to be seen in the same light as just about everything else that happens in the movie: a rainstorm, a cow lowing, a truck plowing by on the highway. For him, the 'awakening' is no more and no less miraculous than any of those other things. But I felt his style of filmmaking had already allowed me to see the world of the film from that perspective, so much so that this explicitly 'miraculous' turn had a kind of defusing power.

The movie is book-ended with remarkable single-take, partially time-lapsed shots of a sunrise and a sunset. The tension I see in the movie can be summed up by how we interpret those shots: do they serve a storybook function of mythical beginnings and endings, or are they an anchoring in the cosmos itself, a specific powerful moment caught on camera and in time? In my experience of the film, the narrative turn of the miracle awakening saps the opening and ending of their simultaneously natural and spiritual power (the opening in hindsight and the ending by distraction). For a filmmaker whose genius, in my opinion, lies in communicating a sense of sublimity about the human condition through a cinematic realism, the fairytale plot device gets in the way of that genius. But all told, the movie is so far superior to most movie-going experiences that it is not to be missed.