




10-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Vachani, Nilita (2021) "Frederick Wiseman's ESSENE (1972): The Duality of Mary and Martha," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss2/6>

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Frederick Wiseman's *ESSENE* (1972): The Duality of Mary and Martha

Abstract

America's legendary documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman shot *Essene* 50 years ago at the height of the commune movement in the United States. Unlike his previous institutional films which showcase an insane asylum, a public high school, an inner city police force, a hospital, and a military training school, *Essene's* canvas is the far less turbulent terrain of a serene and austere Benedictine monastery devoted to the love and service of God and the divine spirit. This paper undertakes a close textual and hermeneutic analysis of *Essene* alongside an appraisal of Wiseman's working methodology, his cinematic portrayals of character and dramaturgy, and his discursive construction of a central thesis. The film is analyzed from the tripartite perspective of the central Benedictine tenets of study, prayer, and work, alongside an application of Goffman's dramaturgical insights into the performance of social interaction within institutions. What does Wiseman's time capsule tell us about the glue that binds, and the tensions that fray intentional communities?

Keywords

Frederick Wiseman, Observational Cinema, Benedictine Monastery, Intentional Community, Documentary, Commune, Social System, Psychoanalysis

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Author Notes

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“...we are members one of another”

St. Paul: Romans (12:5) as quoted by Benedict Reid, OSB¹

America’s legendary documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman shot *Essene* 50 years ago at the height of the commune movement in the United States. During a period characterized by a hippie counter-culture and an array of pacifist, ecological, black consciousness, feminist and other communitarian formations, Wiseman chose as his focus, a Benedictine monastery. Neither does he name the monastery in the film, nor is its location revealed. It exists, therefore, uprooted from space and time, a world unto itself, the preoccupations of its members, abstruse yet urgent.

A close textual analysis of *Essene* fifty years after its making² is particularly revealing at a moment in our history when the United States appears splintered: fissures deepening around questions of race, class, identity and politics. As in previous periods of social unrest (see Barkun 1984, Berry 1992), intentional communities thrive in the 21st century, their public presence only “the tip of the communal iceberg,”³ since, according to Miller, many prefer to live outside public scrutiny.⁴ What can we learn about communitarian living from Wiseman’s time capsule of 50 years ago? What does *Essene* tell us about the glue that binds and the tensions that fray a collective formed in the pursuit of a common goal?

The intentional community of the monastery in *Essene* consists on the surface of a group of like-minded individuals, guided by a common purpose, living a self-sufficient and independent existence outside the norms of nuclear family and the socio-economic, cultural and political obligations of state.

In choosing a monastic order as a system worthy of documentation, Wiseman in this, his sixth film, moved away from the more turbulent terrains of his previous works: a correctional institute for criminals and the mentally ‘insane’ in *Titicut Follies* (1967), a soulless and regimented public high school in *High School* (1968), an inner city police force policing largely black neighborhoods in *Law and Order* (1969), an overburdened emergency ward in *Hospital* (1970), and a military school readying young recruits for combat in *Basic Training* (1971). To date, Wiseman’s oeuvre of 45 documentaries (to which he adds one every year) comprises an essential visual archive spanning American institutional life. *Essene*, the most mystifying of Wiseman’s films upon first encounter, and I use that descriptive deliberately, opens up to fresh interpretive insight upon repeated viewings. Such accessibility to the work has been made possible by the inclusion of Wiseman’s films on the streaming platform [Kanopy](#) in early 2018, prior to which, they were extremely difficult to see outside the occasional university screening and beyond their PBS broadcasts.

Like other social systems, coenobitic monasticism is guided by a set of rules and regulations that guide its values, practices and internal hierarchies. “The

bureaucracy in a monastery,” Wiseman remarked, “is quite similar to that in a high school or a hospital.”⁵

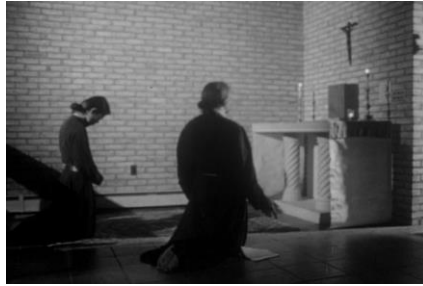
Wiseman’s cinema of surfaces refuses de rigeur to enter inner states by employing the usual empathetic documentary techniques of the interview or the voice-over. It is precisely for this reason that Wiseman’s films become “voyages of discovery”⁶ for the viewer who must make sense of them, discerning meaning on her own. A film that to me appeared baffling and fragmented on an initial viewing reveals its architecture and inner cohesion upon deeper engagement. Working with the film is similar to the monk’s lectio in *Essene*, it slowly opens up to divination.⁷ In a sermon on Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), placed by Wiseman at the film’s conclusion, the Abbot vaunts ‘the Mary quality’ as “...when you see the inter-connection, the harmony, the one thing behind the many, then you gain the wisdom.” Such is the task laid forth for an ‘ideal’ viewer of *Essene*.⁸

The film’s opening establishes the playing ground of the film in three brief shots. The opening shot features a bespectacled and muscular man wearing briefs who rakes leaves off a freshly mown lawn. The second is a wide two-shot of robed brothers kneeling in prayer before a candle-lit mantel decorated with a simple wooden cross affixed to the wall. The third is a high angle shot of a monk, lounging in an armchair, reading a book. The economy of the opening lays out the essential principles of Benedictine monastic life: *Labora, Ora et Studium*: Work, Prayer and Study. We are also introduced to Wiseman’s formalism. Hardly fitting the “fly on

the wall” trope⁹ that unfairly come to saddle Observational Cinema, Wiseman’s films, while deliberately loose in their exploratory dimension, are always rigorously crafted.



Shot 1



Shot 2



Shot 3

The first scene is a read aloud from the Rule of Benedict:

The life of a monk ought to be at all times Lentian in its character but since few have the strength for that, we therefore urge that in these days of Lent the brethren should lead lives of great purity and should also in this sacred season expiate the negligences of other times. This will be readily done if we refrain from all sin and empower ourselves to prayer with tears to reading, to compunction of heart, and to abstinence. That each one, over and above the measure prescribed for him, offer God something of his own free will and the joy of the Holy Spirit. That each one tell his Abbot what he is offering and it to be done with his consent and blessing because what is done without the permission of the spiritual father shall be prescribed to presumption and vainglory, and not reckoned meritorious. Everything therefore has to be done with the approval of the Abbot.

The reading from the original text is lightly edited over reaction shots of the brothers’ faces listening attentively. At the outset, the core values of a Benedictine way of life are made explicit alongside its expectations of its brethren and the power

hierarchies within. Next follows a surprising interpretation from the monk in shot 3, who turns out to be the Abbot:

I'm interested in that last sentence, "everything done with the Abbot's approval." If it is true today that authority is more of a shared responsibility, then this Abbot's approval becomes more and more a community awareness of what we are doing, not secret and private matters of each person... this brings us into a higher level of corporate consciousness, and finally, a corporate approval of our life.

The camera tilts down from its hold on the Abbot's face, past the cross on his chest and comes to rest on his hands holding the scripture, his own notebook nestled in its pages, a pen in his hand. The image reinforces the individual hand that interprets religious text. Under two minutes into the film and we have shifted away from any preconceived notion of the commune's orthodoxy. The Abbot voluntarily relinquishes his authority in favor of community awareness and a higher form of "corporate consciousness." The institution is recast as a progressive one with an egalitarian and participatory body politic.

Later in the film, the Abbot draws a distinction between Pharisaic law and their own attempt at the monastery to stretch the letter of the law for "an interpretation of the spirit."

This is where a great deal of conflict comes from in human living... how to deal with man as he is and bring him to the spirit. The Pharisaical answer is you don't really deal with man, you simply impose a Sabbath or a system or a letter upon him.

The Abbot adds that Pharisaic law is not applicable to the monastery, as “We don’t have a definition of how we are going to pray, or what we are going to study, or what exactly our work should be,” a predicament that can lead to “tension in community.” The looser the doctrine, therefore, the more difficult the rule. Indeed, this is the central theme of *Essene*: a pursuit of the sublime, alongside a management of the mundane. Under its serene, stark and austere veneer, and the punctiliously followed routines of prayer, study and work are teeming, searching, restless minds.

Indeed the brothers’ verbal offerings proffered “of (their) own free will and the joy of the Holy Spirit” are an odd mixture of personal remembrance and exhortation, not what one might expect from liturgical prayer. For example, a brother suggests that it’s easy to warm to a stranger who comes to the door, “as love is easily shared among Christians,” but to love someone you know requires work.

...there is the individual, the person that God created, this is the one we have difficulty in. And it’s through living together, through growing together, through accepting that person, not for what he is at the moment, but for what he is becoming... those egocentric habits we have which bug us all, in time really endear you to that person.

A young monk refers to a poster hanging in brother Anthony’s office which pictures a naked man crouched in a corner with the words, “Because you are afraid to love, I am alone.” He urges the congregation to go and look at it, “Because

loneliness is one of the worst things a person can be in.” Utterances such as these serve as windows into interior states which Wiseman’s exacting observational style isn’t interested in ploughing beyond their outward expression.

The Abbot and the monks are not introduced in the film, nor are they thanked in the credits. As is characteristic with Wiseman, we pick up names from some of the interactions witnessed. By the film’s end, however, we know a few of the characters incidentally, but with clarity, such is the precision of Wiseman’s direction and editing, and William Brayne’s sentient cinematography.

A brother shot in extreme close-up from a low angle that has the camera literally looking up his nostrils, offers a surprising three minute soliloquy not to God, but to his ex-analyst!

Remember the name of Elizabeth Fair (sp?). Elizabeth Fair is a lay analyst in New York city, with whom I have had contact and I was under her care for several months and it was quite a wonderful experience at the time. I was able to share the experience of analysis and group therapy...

...to be able to walk around the island of Manhattan amongst all the other people and have a sense of community that you were sharing with roughly 40 other persons was a beautiful experience, a very intimate experience...

His face alights with a smile. Religious epiphany this is not, yet it is expressed with the same physical attributes- closed eyes, and an expression of rapture.



Essene © Zipporah Films

...I really felt I was led by God to this person and to this experience and community because it has certainly prepared me for community life here. Very often I feel that our chapter sessions, occasionally even our prayer meetings become as Elizabeth would say, 'let's have a little group.'"

A parallel is drawn between spiritual salvation within the monastic order and psychoanalytic group therapy. The postulant who has found intimacy within a crowd of forty adds that even the word 'soul' was used in his therapy sessions in New York. This long sequence, left unedited by Wiseman, makes the viewer privy to a revelation that is at once public declaration and private reverie: it obliterates the line between man and monk, between the individual and the communitarian. Loneliness, it would seem, is an underlying impetus to community formation. His

face suffused with emotion, the Elizabeth Fair acolyte may equally be expressing spiritual rapture or carnal crush. The camera tilts down at the end of his reverie and stays on his hands clasped in entreaty.

Later, during a session of Vespers that includes a reading of the parable of the treasure and the pearl from Matthew 13:44-46, the Abbot makes passing reference to elderly brother Joseph's "breakdown" at the monastery sixteen years ago. Brother Joseph struggled and retained the treasure, the Abbot says, "despite his physical manufacturing." The monastery is no stranger to psychological dysfunction: spiritual healing is its salve.¹⁰

Continuing with the chapter session, a long-haired Asian youth, with barely the wisp of down beginning to form on his upper lip, picks up the thread of New York from the previous speaker:

Raro (?) was talking about New York, and it's really difficult to live in that city until you realize that you don't have to *like* all those people, but if you love them, if you care for them, it really makes it a good deal easier.

His voice lifts in emphasis, "I also ask you to remember all those innocents of Hiroshima (pause) who *died*."

Eight minutes into the film, and we are aware of individual quirks and obsessions and the vastly divergent inner worlds of the commune's members. In each man there is a struggle in the moment, the attempt to reconcile the self, its

history and trajectory, with the intentional commitment to seek the “Spirit,” however nebulously that is defined.

The Abbot uses a language that would suit a cognitive therapist:

... so the little problems like in our chapter business should ideally be the workshop of learning to listen to the Spirit. When opinions vary considerably or oppose violently, then what is the Spirit saying in each person, and how does that possibly fit together? Unless we learn that, we just continue to shift the ego battles from one question to another.

Freudian ego psychology laces the subtext in many an interaction.¹¹ The handsome and amiable Abbot is today’s HR manager.¹² Smiling expansively so as not to give offence, he emphasizes the importance of listening and integration, lest the ego simply shift the battleground, in his words, from “what we (are) going to eat,” to “whether or not we will drink beer on Sunday.” Evidently, consummate managerial skills are essential qualifications for the institutional head of a monastery, not simply scholarship of scripture, or heightened devotionality.

Apart from readings from scripture and scenes of liturgical prayer that make up the bulk of the film, there are interactions captured amongst the monks, and brief interludes of engagement in domestic tasks: a young pony-tailed postulant (who, in another scene, is shown smoking languidly while discussing with brother Anthony the apparent improvements in his attitude towards discipline) is shown cleaning up the lounge area, picking up coffee cups, dusting off furniture and photo frames. A

brother in plainclothes harvests potatoes outdoors; the brother in briefs from the first shot is seen again mowing the lawn.

The film returns indoors for a conference between the Abbot and a monk whose name we learn is Wilfred. This entire session revolves around the use of nomenclature and serves as an example of the kind of ego battle to which the Abbot refers. The attention paid in Wiseman's editing to the linear layering of his building blocks¹³ is testament to his careful articulation of theme. The visual geometry of this scene reflects the very nature of the unfolding interaction. Brother Wilfred is seated at his desk with his back wedged against the wall, his arms crossed tightly in front of him. His is an obdurate presence. He is framed over the Abbot's shoulder, and when the camera zooms in on Wilfred, and then zooms out to include them in a two-shot, it mirrors the Abbot's attempt to reach out to the man, and perforce, to retract. Brother Wilfred practically bristles throughout this encounter, making little to no eye contact with the Abbot, who tries in different ways to open him up to conversation.

Wilfred proclaims that he does not consider the use of the first name as a sign of respect, in fact, quite the contrary. The camera moves in on him, arms crossed at the chest, his mind well nigh made up. "There is an old English saying- 'Familiarity Breeds Contempt,' you probably heard it." The Abbot assents that he has. Brother Wilfred continues:

I can assure you that it does. I do not feel the same respect for a person whom I can first name just like that as I would for someone that has a front title to his name or a handle... For my part, I don't readily accord the privilege of first naming me. I do consider it a privilege and I do consider that it can be accorded only by myself.

Certainly an odd conversation within a spiritual conclave! The context for this encounter is never made clear. In true Wisemanesque style we have entered in media res, the viewer must make sense of the scene on her own. Perhaps one of the brothers has called Wilfred by his first name, thereby giving offence. Brother Wilfred pontificates at length on the merit, or lack thereof, of shared baptismal first names:

If the community only had one person of that name... then the need would not arise you see, but on deck here we already have two Davids- we have Dom David and there's David Ram and sometimes there are other Davids...

Here, Brother Wilfred's voice lifts, and he stares off into the distance as though plumbing one of existence's deepest questions: "...*who's to know which David it is?*"

The parallel between spiritual healing and psychoanalysis, casually introduced at the film's beginning by a postulant's reverie of his ex-analyst becomes the core of the interaction here. The Abbot takes on the role of analyst, and instead of letting brother Wilfred's prejudice slide by, pursues an interrogation with the intent to "illuminate" his understanding. The film is intricately welded without appearing to be so. Scenes speak to one another, setting up parallels and

contrasts. We are reminded of a brother's remark that individual idiosyncrasies that "bug us" eventually endear us to the man. At least the Abbot seems determined to break through to Brother Wilfred. Wilfred pauses to note that a fly has entered the room. The Abbot continues, "What does it feel like to you when someone just uses your first name?"

- It's disrespectful. I accept it that way.
- Has it always been that ...?
- (Interrupting) Yes, it's always been that way.
- Before you got 'Wilfred'?
- Yes, it's always been that way. Another thing I never cared for very much when I was in the world known as Edmund, I did not care to be known as 'Ed' or 'Eddie' or whatever else... except by my very close chums of which there were five. Anyone beyond that would be put down in short order.
- What's the difference between your close friends and...?
- Chaps I grew up with. Went to school with. Friends. The rest are acquaintances.
- Why would they have that privilege?
- (Exasperated) Because as I say, I've known them always.
- So using a first name implies access to you? Or having spent a lot of time with you?
- As you wish.

Wilfred looks up and around him:

- You don't mind if I exercise the fly swatter?

He opens the top drawer, produces the swatter, bangs it on his desk, flicks off the offending corpse, replaces the swatter in the drawer, re-crosses his arms. It is a moment of comic absurdity, brilliantly captured by Brayne's ever responsive camera. Brother Wilfred would no doubt love to swat away the pesky fly that is the questing Abbot. Moments such as this, unexpected juxtapositions thrown up by

life itself are found across Wiseman's films, evidence of his wry humor and penchant for the absurd.

Undeterred, the mild-mannered Abbot continues to seek to "illuminate" the brother's understanding as to *why* he might feel this way. If the common experience of childhood is the criterion to accept someone on a first name basis, why not the common experience of brotherhood which spans a longer period? "The common denominator is mutual experience..." the Abbot persists. Wilfred cuts in, "I don't understand half of what you say, but as you wish."

The Abbot retains his sang-froid,

Now you're feeling trapped as if I'm cornering you...
I was trying to illuminate what you were actually saying, I was not
trying to trap you.

Smiling pleasantly, he once again offers the common experience of Christ as a worthy contender to the camaraderie of childhood. "No," says brother Wilfred resolutely. His arms stay firmly crossed; a bunch of keys dangling visibly on the edge of his desk remain unable to unlock his soul. "I don't think so," he says with finality, marking an end to the conversation.



Esse ©Zipporah Films

A brief interlude depicting work and leisure outdoors at sunset is followed by a candle-lit Vespers where the Abbot resumes his customary role of presiding over liturgy. In an unbroken take, 1 minute 40 seconds in length sung to the hymn *Magnificat*, the camera follows the Abbot as he rises, receives the stole and holy water from the oldest monk, Joseph, (the one who has suffered the break-down) then circles the congregation scattering incense, returning to his seat where the camera holds steady on him, tilting down to his hands clasped in prayer. It is remarkable to think that Brayne with Wiseman doing sound wove in and out of this intimate gathering without seemingly causing the slightest disturbance. The rapt congregation appears oblivious to their presence. “The primary responsibility and

the primary goal is to fit into the environment,” said Brayne of his collaboration with Wiseman.¹⁴

A high angle close-up of a devout brother Richard singing solo a little over 20 minutes into the film introduces this second main character who along with the Abbot will dominate the rest of the proceedings. Benson and Anderson have likened the visual style of *Essene* to Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1926)¹⁵ and indeed, the close-up portraiture, the high-contrast lighting and stark compositions are evocative of expressionist cinema.



Essene ©Zipporah Films

Brother Richard offers prayers for brother Anthony: “Healing that will make him whole.” The hand-held camera creates a choreography of moving bodies and clasped hands: “*Heal him, Jesus!*” The harmonic singing overtakes the cry of the cicadas outside. The séance is an intense one, performance integral to the ritual.

As voices sing in unison, “*Make him whole,*” we witness a theology-based psychiatry at work.

All of a sudden the fervor and intimacy break. We are outdoors, following a man who walks down an urban street and enters a store. For the first time we are outside the monastery’s grounds. The man asks a woman at the store where the “picnic types of things might be” and is directed to the correct aisle. In my first viewing of the film, I did not pick up that the man whom the camera follows is no other than brother Wilfred, so transformed is he in appearance, wearing civilian clothes, sporting a straw hat, and without the glasses from the previous scene. Besides, his comportment is entirely unlike his previous appearance. Ease in comprehension is not something Wiseman caters to, so in the absence of a simple identifying title, the viewer undergoes a period of confusion wondering who this person is, or why we have left the confines of the monastery. In fact, the scene *deliberately* makes the viewer think this is *not* Wilfred since he is repeatedly called “Herb” by a store manager who appears to know him, and with whom Wilfred engages in friendly banter. The curmudgeonly monk who faced off the Abbot in the earlier scene is jaunty and sociable here, presenting his everyday self,¹⁶ chatting over trivialities- potato peelers that work and won’t peel away the hand. He clearly enjoys the camera’s attention now that he has it on his terms, outside the communal institution, where, to quote him, familiarity breeds contempt.

Wiseman wrote an essay on his life's work on the occasion of a retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010.¹⁷ A life-long tennis player, Wiseman uses the analogy of a tennis court in describing the rules that govern his filming of institutions. Anything that happens within the court is part of the film. Anything that happens outside the court is part of another film. *Essene* is restricted to life within the monastery and its external grounds, with the exception of this single scene, brother Wilfred's foray into town. While this is an instance of the ball having bounced outside the court, Wiseman chooses to include the scene precisely because it is so revelatory of character. Characters in Wiseman's films are never central to their focus, they are simply part of the filigree of life itself.

Wiseman sees characters with acuity, but chooses to present them in the moment *as they present themselves*. These interactions offer telling examples of Goffman's definition of 'performance' as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."¹⁸ The same brother Wilfred who chafes at being called by his first name within his adopted confraternity laughs and jokes with a store manager he barely knows, not appearing to notice that not only is he addressed by first name, but an incorrect one! The irony is sublime. Wiseman's art presents us with a complex character in just two scenes that are separated in filmic time: the viewer is free to make the connection or miss it altogether.

The two interactions involving brother Wilfred eloquently illustrate Goffman's pithy insight, "Not then, men and their moments. Rather moments and their men."¹⁹ In each scene we witness Wilfred as an 'interactant' within a social occasion. In each he assumes what Goffman calls a 'line' to which he must remain consistent in order to protect his chosen 'face.' "Regardless of whether a person intends to take a line, he will find that he has done so in effect."²⁰ In choosing not to correct the store manager, Wilfred projects the image of the neighborly, well-adjusted and affable customer. In the monastery, however, Wilfred is far from well-integrated, pulling rank, and establishing artificial boundaries. The Abbot in his role as head of institution displays both 'tact' and 'savoir faire'²¹ in his "performance of face-work"²² when dealing with brother Wilfred. "In trying to save the face of others, the person must choose a tack that will not lead to loss of his own; in trying to save his own face, he must consider the loss of face that his action may entail for others."²³ Institutional order is maintained with a careful maneuvering of its moving parts.

A perfect foil to Wilfred is brother Richard, open, seeking, vulnerable, tormented. With his bulky frame and bearded face and ponytail, his larger than life presence is unafraid to "empower (itself) to prayer with tears." A fine singer, Richard's baritone lifts the acapella to soaring heights. In an alternative universe, Richard would make a commanding King Lear or Othello on stage.

A nun with a compassionate Julie Andrews countenance takes a stroll on the monastery's grounds in Richard's company. The shot of the man raking grass precedes the scene with a layover of sound to establish proximity. Richard appears overwrought, and the nun reassures him thus, "When you get down to the fine grain of things, it is going to hurt. Don't worry if it hurts." To this, Richard responds,

The worrying went away a long time ago. The only thing we worry about is the effect it has on the other people around us, but I shouldn't do that either as the Holy Spirit takes care of that too...

Again, we have no idea of the context. Gently, the nun says,

Here you really begin to know each other ... when you live so close together, you reveal yourself and others reveal themselves to you, and sometimes, not intentionally, we touch the tender spots in people.

Richard speaks of his raw wounds:

It's like ripping off the old skin and new skin appears and it's fresh wounds in which salt is sprinkled.

The camera moves from a two shot to a slow zoom into Richard's face. He continues,

Every little thing hurts. And you want to love so bad. They give it all to you and you want to give it right back...

We see the physical manifestation of brother Richard's despair without understanding its cause. The events that Richard refers to are not on camera, adding to our sense of intrigue or displacement as we actively scour the film for meaning.

The mystical body is so present here, so I can do it here, but it's so hard on the outside... you get all hung up when the ego takes over, like this, like it's doing to me right now ... it's so much easier to play the Bardos ... in the Tibetan Book of the Dead you go through all the Bardos of development, all the strange illusions and Maya... it's so easy to play those games but you can't do that here.

-You can't do that here.

-No, you can't do that here... that's why there's no depression. There's unhappiness sometimes, but there's no depression. There's a river of joy underneath, but you can't always express that to people around you.

Tears roll down brother Richard's face. However unorthodox the Abbey, the spirit is free to roam only within distinct boundaries. That injunction is clear in the repeated refrain, "You can't do that here." The camera circles, moving from Richard to the nun's kindly face. Off-screen, he says,

That's what disturbs me so much when people start talking about the church and they only see it right now, they don't see it stretching out in time.

Richard, in seeking a more expansive theology may well be the outlier in that community. The nun soothes him while steering clear of controversy. She reminds him that they are all of different generations with diverse backgrounds and experiences. "You can really rejoice and be the person that god created you to be." While her response is somewhat pat and inadequate in the face of Richard's torment, it does appear to have its desired effect in calming him down. He thanks her, they hug, and return indoors. The camera has been an intimate third in this delicate scene. At no point did the conversation appear triggered by its presence,

nor were the participants censoring themselves on its account. Unlike brother Wilfred's interaction at the store, where the camera heightened a certain performativity in the two men, Richard's breakdown is accepted as a matter of course, as testimony, in fact, to the supplicant's inherent sincerity.

The very next scene has Richard seated at the piano giving a stirring rendition of the African American spiritual "Deep River." His voice soaring, Richard is in his element,

*"Deep River, my home is over Jordan.
Deep River, Lord, I want to cross over into camp-ground."*

Richard, the proverbial seeker, will likely find in the monastery only a temporary home. His search for 'campground' is far from over.²⁴

In the Eucharist that follows, to which nuns as well as lay visitors are invited, *Gloria* is sung in acapella, "Lord, have mercy, O lord have mercy, O..." The refrain builds sonorously. An extreme low angle shot has the Abbot towering above, his arms outstretched, perfectly mirroring the crucifixion. On display amongst the congregation are the very disparities in age and background to which the nun referred. The generational range is evident both visually and in the prayers spoken aloud. Brother Joseph, the oldest monk, prays for "the widows and the orphans, the sick and the infirm." Brother Richard, consistent with his preoccupation from the previous scene, prays for the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Holy Father in Rome, "and all those seeking unity in the Church." Brother Anthony

remembers the brothers and abbots who have passed. The brother from New York still has “Elizabeth Fair” on his mind. The young Asian pacifist prays for the “draft resisters who are still in prison.” The cigarette smoking postulant whose behavior has improved praises the “dedication of the Berrigans.” Brother Richard sends a prayer “especially for Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.” Significantly, the younger inmates, while remaining sequestered within the monastic order, appear inextricably invested in the political, social, and civic undercurrents of the time. Philip Berrigan was a Jesuit teacher and an active anti-war protester and supporter of the civil rights movement who was repeatedly imprisoned for his activism.²⁵ The Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Chardin held a Darwinian view of evolution, replacing the Book of Genesis with a treatise on ‘Cosmogogenesis’ for which he won Rome’s disfavor.²⁶ The Asian postulant remains invested in Hiroshima and pacifist causes, while another of the younger monks prays for “resolution to the conflict in the middle east” likely referring to Israel’s 6-day war. Politics and religion are inexorably intertwined.

The overpowering feeling is that the hold of the “Spirit” is a tenuous one amongst these teeming, disparate minds. The Abbot alone seems in control of the ship pulled by competing tides. Ritual is its steady mast. The consecrated wine of the Eucharist is poured accompanied by the singing of hymns (“My cup is overflowing.”) The Abbot makes the rounds with the thurible, releasing incense

and bestowing blessings upon the congregation. A prayer of peace is passed from person to person as he breaks bread, “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.”

Filmed in long takes, unusual for Wiseman, the camera lingers in its witnessing of solemnity and ardor. As has been noted, there are fewer sequences in *Essene* than in any Wiseman film of the period.²⁷ The prayer concludes, and the congregation sits for the evening meal. The visitors sit at one table, the senior monks at another, the juniors at a third, the Abbot sits by himself. Order is perfectly maintained on the surface.

The closest there is to a revolt occurs towards the end of the film. It is a meeting of a core group of senior monks who confer about the problem that is brother Wilfred. An older monk speaks frankly,

We have to face the fact which we do not face... that every single postulant we have had, and every single person who is now in the community, and that includes the Abbot right straight down, brother Wilfred does not like. And none of us can really get along with him.

Wiseman in inimitable understatement, does *not*, unlike the ‘crisis’ structure of *cinéma vérité* films of this period,²⁸ build this bombshell of a revelation into a dramatic climax. Instead, this scene exists like any other, a slice of daily life, neither less nor more significant than any other.

It appears from the conversation that a new initiate named Bart has had his feelings hurt by brother Wilfred to the point that he wishes to leave the fraternity. It is as commonplace an institutional problem as bullying. Brother Anthony adds

that anyone he introduces to the Abbey similarly meets with brother Wilfrid's disapproval. He despairs of Wilfred's "beating up" of initiates (a term, I hope, he uses figuratively!) and is of the opinion that resolution cannot occur privately, such conflicts need to be openly addressed in chapter sessions. The Abbot, diplomatic as ever, requests that "specific cases" be referred to him "in the future," to which brother Antony retorts that the Abbot has been "saying this for 18 years and I have been giving you tons of specifics and not a damn thing happens." The camera holds unerringly on Anthony's face, firm in its tension and disapproval.

There are a few in the family who have to get with it...
the solution is to start loving the brothers, that's all there is to it.

Brotherly love, it would seem, is no easy task. By contrast, the evocation of divine love is omnipresent and powerful, erupting in full theatrical effulgence an hour into the film during the Eucharist when brother Richard takes the stage to perform an uninterrupted 7 minute soliloquy. The unsuspecting viewer of *Essene* has now entered the most bewildering section of the film.

"I want to tell you a story about a man and his beloved," brother Richard begins. The esoteric and contorted tale involves the visit of a man to the town of his 'beloved,' where he is introduced to the old townsmen, "who dance with stately step," and to the town's younger population who dance with "merry step" and "sparkle." The man eventually appears to lose his foothold as each group becomes self-enclosed, dancing its own dance. *"Make them all dance the same dance,"* the

man cries out, says Richard, eventually tearing off the vestment, and in the process, “crippling his beloved,” finally retreating to a tower from which he proceeds to throw himself off. Brother Richard’s histrionics and hyperbole are met with matter-of-fact acceptance by the rest of the group. “*How shall he be healed?*” Richard moans. In a state of passionate delirium, he opens his eyes and rises to his feet,

Do you know anyone like that here? Well if you don’t know someone like that, then you’re looking at someone like that right now.

Following the scattered clues in the film, I interpret Richard’s performance as a cry for unity within the church and his own uneasy existence within the monastery, straddled as he is between an older and a younger generation with divergent allegiances. Continuing to apply Goffman’s dramaturgical framework to the social institution of the monastery, brother Richard superbly conducts his “impression management”²⁹ through his performance. In what Goffman has termed the “information game” namely, “a cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery,”³⁰ a “working consensus” is arrived at by the audience, who are also, participant-actors. The brothers gather around Richard, hands reach for his head, neck and torso, arms intertwine around him. “*Heal him!*” the litany rises.

As a self-appointed ‘ideal’ viewer of the film, and one who does not claim her interpretations are in any way intended by Wiseman, I read in brother Richard’s performative, a sublimation of his own disappointment with the church (the “raw

wounds”) alongside his perceived inadequacy to love God and his spiritual brethren in the manner prescribed. Brother Richard initially presents himself as the storyteller of the narrative, one who stands in the wings as it were, both onstage and off. Then, in a surprise reveal, the 3rd person ‘visitor’ to the land of the ‘beloved’ becomes no other than Richard himself, full-blown and pressingly onstage. “*I am very crippled!*” he declares. The performance of the confessional provides Richard with a frame-work that both restores his self-esteem and envelopes him within community through compassion and forgiveness. Both Jourard and Schlenker write about the strategic value of self-disclosure in fostering intimacy. “A person who won’t disclose is pictured as isolated, unknown, and therefore unloved,”³¹ brother Wilfred being a classic case in point, whereas brother Richard is the very opposite.

Theatre, psycho-therapy, trance-possession, liturgical prayer meet in the moment. The performative speech act has had its desired perlocutionary effect.³² Expressions of drunken joy fill the room. A range of personalities are on display here, some rejoice in making themselves physically available, others are more cautious. Brother Wilfred is never seen in embrace.



Essene ©Zipporah Films



Essene ©Zipporah Films

The Benedictine experience in Wiseman's *Essene* is a theater of the sublime. Never are the brothers more conjoined in spirit than through music, song, oratory, story-telling, gesture, touch. Brayne's cinematography is at its finest in this film, capturing in extreme close-ups, and unhurried moving shots, the dance of ritualized worship. The sumptuous black and white, the clean stark lines of composition, the play of shadow and light imbue the film with a haunting timelessness.

Enigmatic too is the choice of the title, *Essene*, a word which does not occur in the film, and which hearkens back to a pre-Christian ascetic sect existing in the second century BC to which the monastery in the film bears no professed lineage. I can only assume that Wiseman chose the abstruse title for the very timelessness that the word evokes.

While we are not given any biographical information on the monks (aside from the brief reference to Brother Joseph's breakdown), Wiseman does include a scene where the Abbot reveals an important detail from his past. He has called the meeting for his "own benefit" he tells the group of four senior monks who had earlier gathered to discuss brother Wilfred's misanthropy. The Abbot delves into a cautionary tale from his childhood: his father was a strong and powerful man who in his sobriety ignored his children, but "When he started to drink then his regard would fall on them," and he, as a child, would become "overwhelmed" and fall silent. "The powerful impact of passion I couldn't do anything with," the Abbot

confesses. His “vaunted intuition,” he adds, “fails” in the face of such passion. Given the scene’s positioning, and Wiseman does not adhere to chronology in the edit, the viewer may consider the recently witnessed outburst on the part of brother Richard to be the likely trigger. Recalling the Rule of Lent from the film’s beginning, as well as the Abbot’s distancing from Pharisaic law, the viewer can’t help but think how much easier it would be to survive as a commune if passions could indeed be contained by covenant. “The Pharisaical answer is you don’t really deal with man, you simply impose a Sabbath or a system or a letter upon him.” The Abbot, in embracing corporate consciousness, however, must always deal with the frailties of man.

The final scene in many a Wiseman film showcases the head of institution at a podium giving a speech that throws light on the film’s themes. The concluding lecture by the Abbot in *Essene* has him in low angle towering in benign presence over the congregation, a prominent cross visible behind him in an otherwise black background. The Abbot’s chosen sermon involves the Lord’s “two close friends” Martha and Mary, the first, symbolizing “frenetic activism,” the latter, “controlled, quiet wisdom.” The Abbot makes the point that both Martha and Mary live within us. Smiling amiably, he says,

We are not very well put together... Martha has to go to the Lord and ask him to speak to Mary. Why doesn’t she speak to Mary directly? They are not communicating very well.

With theatrical flourish, the Abbot describes Martha as “searching relentlessly, aggressively, possessively to deal with all the things of creation,” whereas Mary looks through it all, “contemplating you might say, the one thing behind all the many things.” The Abbot locates ‘Egoism’ in the Martha quality:

It is overwhelmed by the disconnection of things...she is fretting about all these things to get the meal on the table...The ego is possessing and as soon as the ego runs into another ego, there is war.

Gesture is an inextricable part of his speech. The Abbot curls his hands into fists and head-butts them, a move unerringly caught by Brayne’s camera. “*Who left the rake out overnight?*” he adds by way of example, producing an audible chuckle. Wiseman’s repetition of the shot of the monk raking grass has, of course, been no accident.

But in the Mary quality, the ego subsides... It knows it is fruitless to manage, to possess, to acquire, to desire things, even if for the good of other people.

Ultimately it would seem that the problem with monastic living is no different from any lay enterprise, it has to do with the clash of personalities and the difficulty of getting along. Egos must be smoothed over, and passions contained. Brother Richard’s angst over the Catholic church’s rejection of Teilhardian cosmogenesis will never be adequately addressed within the system, but his turmoil will find release through affective role-playing. The sonorous repetition of the prayer “*Make him whole*” bears a distinctly psychological subtext.

“The ultimate mystery is *Christ* looking... contemplating *us*,” says the Abbot. The monks are seated in rank and file. We see once again the close-ups of faces we have come to know, brother Wilfred among them, sitting apart and alone. “*Will you listen?*” the Abbot exhorts in dramatic peroration, his voice rising,

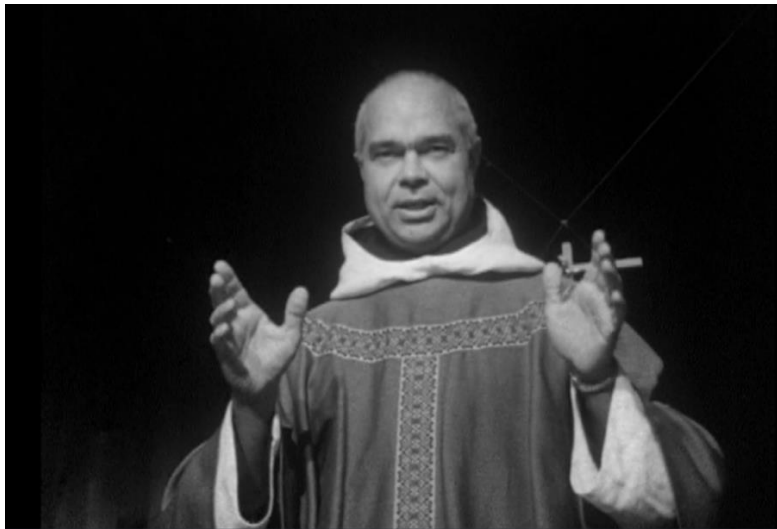
Will you listen deeply like Mary? ... Will you listen so that the Father, the Spirit and I may come to dwell within you?”

And here, the Abbot looks down, directly into camera for the first time. In doing so, he assumes the role of “*Christ* looking... contemplating *us*.” The film ends breaking the fourth wall.

Wiseman’s decision to place the sermon of Mary and Martha at the film’s conclusion makes it an oblique commentary on all that has transpired before. The Abbot emerges as the manager par excellence of a social system he is ordained to control, and he does so astutely, not by dictum, but by example, and a careful interpretation of scripture to serve his end. “For the things of this world weren’t meant to be managed by the ego,”³³ yet, it is the battle between egos that poses the greatest threat to St. Paul’s unitarian vision, “We are members one of another...”

The viewer recognizes the Martha principle in brother Wilfred, in his trivial pursuit of the perfect potato peeler. Martha also exists in brother Richard who is seeking and desperate, craving attention, “overwhelmed by the disconnection of things.” We see Mary in the Abbot himself, contemplative, collected, always listening. In exhorting his congregation to listen deeply, and following this with a

deliberate look into Wiseman's camera, and by extension, the audience of this film, the Abbot reveals how fully in control of his communication he is. And in ultimate control, of course, is the filmmaker, who has arranged the warp and weft of the film to craft how it will envelope us.



Essene ©Zipporah Films

Watching *Essene* is a powerful sensory experience, the viewer drawn inevitably into the theater of the liturgical. As the film provides no contextual information, readers will be interested to learn that the nameless monastery featured in the film is St. Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers, Michigan, an Anglican Benedictine house within the Episcopal church.³⁴ Until 1969 it was a dependent priory of Nashdom Abbey in England with Benedict Reid as its prior. Upon becoming an independent abbey, Reid was elected its first Abbot, and the next year, Wiseman had permission to shoot his film on the premises. He had been denied permission at three or four Roman Catholic monasteries previously.³⁵ Adhering to

his belief in “corporate consciousness,” Abbot Reid made his permission conditional upon Wiseman getting the acquiescence of each monk individually.³⁶

Benedict Reid continued as head of St. Gregory’s Abbey until 1986 when reaching the age of 65, he offered his resignation as required by its constitution. In preparation for his impending retirement, and to give the Abbey an opportunity to plan its course without him, Reid left for a year’s sabbatical in 1984, which included a road trip across the United States in an RV.³⁷ Brother Anthony, whom the viewer has come to know from several scenes in the film was left in charge of the Abbey as its temporary head. The Abbot’s writings during his year of travel were eventually published by him in a book entitled *A Spirit Loose in the World*. In the fifteen years since the making of Wiseman’s film, Abbot Reid’s open mindedness had expanded well beyond Benedictine doctrine. In a chapter titled “The Spirit’s Reflection,” he writes,

Can small groups in the parish be allowed to explore various kinds of spirituality? Classical Western, Eastern, Alcoholics Anonymous, holistic health, journaling, meditation, exercise and diet, Biblical, Sacramental, environmental well-being, justice for the poor, inner transformation programs, healing of memories, world peace and many more? If a particular way of spirituality promotes health and growth, then Christ and the Spirit must surely be there even if not named directly. Bringing all of this spirituality to the Eucharist could make it a celebration and feast of extraordinary richness.³⁸

A re-calibration of the expanding Spirit blurring the very boundaries of the commune’s expressed intentionality is certainly an extraordinary departure on the part of its spiritual head, a re-envisioning that would have greatly appealed to a

seeker such as brother Richard had it occurred during his time. Perhaps the soon to retire Abbot was in a better position to make such a declaration, given that the everyday running of the monastery was no longer his responsibility. Weighing on him too was a rapidly changing world to which he refers frequently in the book, and which he sees becoming increasingly resistant to organized religion.³⁹

Interestingly, the monastery upon the Abbot's return a year later,⁴⁰ had whittled down to half its original strength and consisted of ten senior and one junior monk. "The Abbott is doing pots and pans occasionally," Reid adds dryly.⁴¹ A true testament to his openness and human resource skills is Reid's success in keeping together that motley group as long as he did. Predictably, it was the younger monks who decamped during his sabbatical. While Reid professes, outwardly at least, his belief that the lord's beloved friends Mary and Martha can co-exist, there is little evidence of such success. The writer, Judson Jerome, who lived in, and co-founded a commune while researching other communes, points to the most plebian of problems as being the root of great disaffection. "If you figure out who is going to carry out the garbage everything else will be simple," he writes.⁴²

Fifty years after the making of *Essene*, all manner of communes continue to proliferate in the United States, the popularity of eco-villages and co-housing projects predominating among intentional communities. Despite the documented increase in populations that prefer to remain religiously unaffiliated,⁴³ Miller is of the opinion that "communities based in every conceivable religion from traditional

Christianity to belief in flying saucers to wicca are alive and well.”⁴⁴ Of far greater weight, however, are the collective identities that thrive in the nether realms of cyber space, offering community and communal action *without* the requirement of cohabitation. As one might expect, the duality of Mary and Martha are far better accommodated online. Without delving into the social psychology of virtual communities, a subject that lies outside the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that half a century after the making of *Essene*, the communitarian in virtual space is free to profess, opine, denounce, divine, embrace and embattle without having to contend with the irritation of who left out the rake overnight.

¹ The unnamed Abbot in the film is Benedict Reid who served as Abbot of St. Gregory’s Abbey between 1969 and 1989. He published a travelogue titled *A Spirit Loose in the World*, (Harbor House West Publishers, 1993) to which I refer frequently in the text. The quote is from page 268.

² To my knowledge no detailed filmic analysis of *Essene* exists. At the time of its release the most comprehensive review was Patrick Sullivan’s in *Film Quarterly*, 27, no. 1, Fall 1973.

³ “Introduction” in *Spiritual and Visionary Communities: Out to Save the World*, in Miller (Ed.) University of Kansas, Routledge, 2016:12.

⁴ The Foundation for Intentional Community lists 785 intentional communities in the United States. These self-listings are likely a fraction of the real number. The Benedictine monastery of the film does not appear in the list.

⁵ Quoted in Thomas Meehan, “The Documentary Maker,” *Saturday Review of the Arts* 55, no. 49, December 1972: 14.

⁶ A phrase used by Wiseman to describe his work which became the title of Barry Keith Grant’s book on Frederick Wiseman. Quoted in “Preface,” *Voyages of Discovery*, University of Illinois Press, 1992.

⁷ Abbot Reid describes the lectio, the daily perusal of the Bible, in the following terms: “From reading and reflecting he (the monk) gradually progresses towards a few simple concepts, or even a word.” 1993:268.

⁸ Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson are of the opinion that the “inside knowledge” required for an understanding of Wiseman’s films cannot be obviated by ‘ideal’ or ‘invited’ or ‘intended’ interpretations. Notes, *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989: 354.

⁹ The term is attributed to Ricky Leacock by Grant, 1992: 11.

¹⁰ In his book Abbot Reid describes brother Joseph as having struggled with schizophrenia and been institutionalized for it. See 1993: 264. His candid reference to the brother’s disability during a prayer session in the film frames the monastery as an inclusive institution and an alternative solution to mental illness.

¹¹ Interestingly, in his travel memoir, Abbot Reid refers to the usefulness of the Myers-Briggs Type Instrument (MBTI) in understanding personality types for purposes of conflict resolution. 1993:282.

¹² Benson and Anderson refer to the Abbot’s style as “enlightened capitalist management.” 1989: 206.

¹³ Bill Nichols calls this the ‘mosaic’ structure in “Fred Wiseman’s Documentaries: Theory and Structure,” *Film Quarterly* 31, no.3 (Spring 1978) 15-28. I prefer to use the term ‘building blocks’ because of the linearity and independence of Wiseman’s sequences.

¹⁴ William Brayne interviewed by Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, London, 11 October 1986. I am grateful to the authors for their generosity in sharing this unpublished transcript.

¹⁵ Benson and Anderson, 1989: 205.

¹⁶ I refer specifically to Goffman’s dramaturgical model of social interaction in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959.

¹⁷ “A Sketch of a Life” in *Frederick Wiseman*, Joshua Siegel and Marie-Christine de Navacelle, Eds., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010: 28.

¹⁸ Goffman, 1959: 15.

¹⁹ Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1966:3.

²⁰ Goffman, 1966:5.

²¹ Goffman, 1966:28.

²² Goffman, 1966:31.

²³ Goffman, 1966:14.

²⁴ The insertion of the song right after brother Richard's reference both to a "river of joy," and to the Tibetan Bardos is an example of Wiseman's formal and cerebral editing process. The Bardos in the *Book of the Dead* refer to the period when life ends and the soul transmigrates. The search for "camp-ground" in the African-American spiritual similarly refers to life after death.

²⁵ Additionally, Berrigan was part of the 'Baltimore Four,' and, with his brother, Daniel, part of the 'Catonsville 9,' who were imprisoned for their ritualistic blood sacrifices that symbolically represented the shedding of American and Vietnamese blood during the Vietnam war.

²⁶ Chardin who was nominated to the French Academy of Sciences in 1950 had his writings proscribed by the Holy Office in a monitum issued in June 1962 which remains in force today: "(The) works abound in such ambiguities and indeed even serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine... For this reason, the Holy Office asked bishops, superiors of religious institutes, presidents of universities and rectors of seminaries to protect the minds, especially of the young, against the dangers presented by the works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin and of his followers." A petition from the Pontifical Council for Culture requesting the lifting of the monitum is presently under consideration by Pope Francis.

²⁷ Patrick Sullivan, "Essene" in *Film Quarterly*, 27, no. 1, Fall 1973:55.

²⁸ See Stephen Mamber's description of the Crisis Structure in *Screen*, 1972.

²⁹ Goffman, 1966. See also Barry Schlenker on Impression Management, 1980.

³⁰ Goffman, 1959: 8.

³¹ Schlenker, Barry R, 1980: 185. See also Jourard, 1964.

³² Stanley Cavell, "Performative and Passionate Utterances" in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006: 155-191.

³³ The Abbot's discussion of Mary and Martha is reminiscent of Freudian ego psychology. In his memoir, Reid professes belief in the contributions of psychologist Virginia Satir and her experiential communication therapy practice for families. This included role-playing, fantasy, hypnosis and psychodrama. Reid, *A Spirit Loose*: 282.

³⁴ <https://www.saintgregorysthreerivers.org/>

³⁵ Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions*: 354.

³⁶ Wiseman interviewed by Randall Conrad, quoted in Benson and Anderson, "Notes" in *Reality Fictions*: 1989: 354.

³⁷ Reid, *A Spirit Loose*: Introduction.

³⁸ Reid, *A Spirit Loose*: 247-248.

³⁹ Reid, *A Spirit Loose*: 286-288.

⁴⁰ Reid continued as Abbot until 1989 when his retirement was accepted.

⁴¹ Reid, *A Spirit Loose*: 288.

⁴² Judson Jerome, *Families of Eden: Communes and the New Anarchism*, Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1975. Quoted in Miller, 2016: 205.

⁴³ See the Pew Forum Survey, 2015. "A Closer look at America's rapidly growing religious "nones:" <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

⁴⁴ Miller, Timothy, "Religious Communes in America: An Overview" in *Spiritual and Visionary Communities: Out to Save the World*, in Miller (Ed.) University of Kansas, Routledge, 2016.

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