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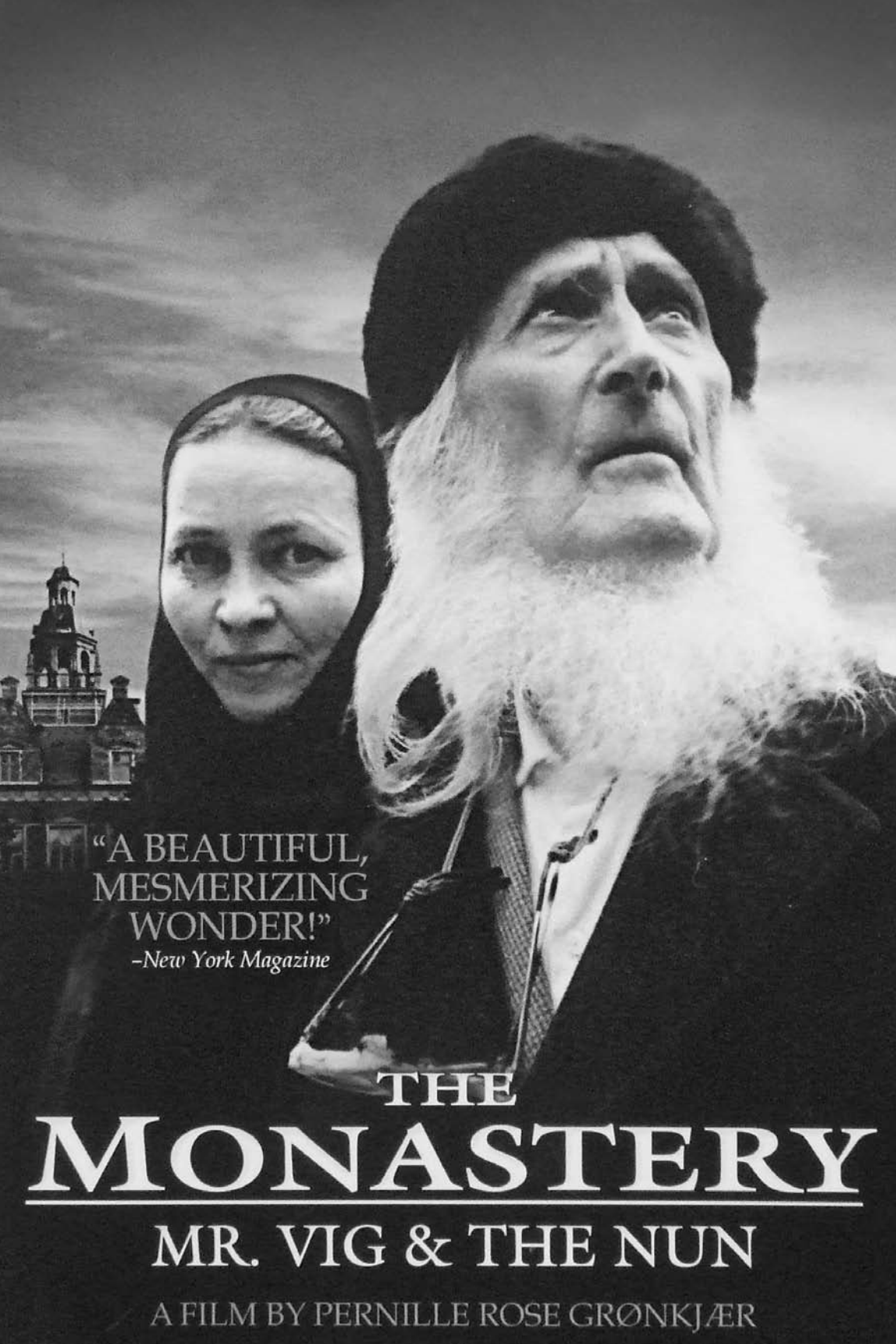
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“A BEAUTIFUL,
MESMERIZING
WONDER!”
—*New York Magazine*

THE MONASTERY

MR. VIG & THE NUN

A FILM BY PERNILLE ROSE GRØNKJÆR

THE MANIFOLD NATURE OF LOVE

Pernille Rose Grønkjær’s “The Monastery” is a lavish documentary about lifeworks and dreams set in a ramshackle castle. Enthralled, former Danish Film Institute consultant Allan Berg Nielsen reports from a world of stubborn wills and serious qualms.

By Allan Berg Nielsen

“Mr. Vig, Matushka brought an icon for you...”

“Oh!”

“This is an icon for you. It’s our present for you. To start a monastery here.”

“I like that. I like that one. I like that one very much. Oh, it’s beautiful. It’s beautiful.”

“You can kiss it.”

“Oh, thank you very much...”

Amvrosya, a nun, and Matushka, her superior, have arrived at Jørgen Laursen Vig’s castle and he reverently admires the icon they have brought him as a gift from their monastery in Russia. He makes the sign of the cross, he praises the beauty of the artwork, he is sincerely pleased. But he does not kiss the icon. He does not submit to its holiness. He wants to transform his castle into a Russian-Orthodox monastery with Amvrosya’s help, but he balks at making the final commitment.

Later in the film, when several nuns have moved in, a procession is organized. Reluctantly, he joins in. He sees that the whole castle has been redone and incorporated into the holiness he invited in but whose consequences he had not quite foreseen.

They fix up the room he set aside for a chapel prior to their arrival, but now Vig says it has to be a temporary arrangement. No, Amvrosya explains, once the chapel has been consecrated, it can no longer be changed.

Reprinted with the kind permission of the Danish Film Institute, *The Manifold Nature of Love* first appeared in *Film #53*, November 2006.

Vig has come a long way toward holiness in the three renunciations of the monastic vow. For 86 years he has lived in chastity, he clearly leads a humble life of poverty in the ramshackle castle. But he cannot submit to obedience; devotion is his trouble.

Grønkjær's film is about this holiness.

LANDSCAPE AND CHAPEL

The Danish landscape around the castle is beautiful and the camerawork eloquently describes this beauty. Beautiful, too, is the Russian art that, first in the single icon given to Vig, then in volume, gradually fills the chapel with



Photo Courtesy Frej Schmedes

Mr. Vig.

fragrant, colour-saturated imagery captured by the camera in long, caring shots. The iconostasis, a sacred backdrop for immersion in the readings, is depicted against the seasonal changes of the landscape as Vig continues his free life. Both are depictions of beauty, the Russian art in the chapel against the Danish countryside outside in the gardens and the fields. Nature and culture, the prayer hours and the seasons, winter scenery and the iconostasis, the nun's kitchen and Vig's library. The secular and the sacred. Grønkjær's film details two different kinds of beauty. Like Vig, it cannot choose one over the other, depicting them side by side, closely cut together.

LOVE

Sexuality is for making babies, Vig says. For a few weeks, a few times in a lifetime. Yes, he had a love once a very long time ago, but since then that side of life has been covered by other passions, studies, books and travel, a series of projects, culminating in the foundation of the monastery. Love – he doesn't know much about it. Sure, he has had the feeling, he has loved.

The film is not content to leave it at that, however. The nature of love is multi-faceted and inclusive. Vig does not elude it in the long run. A warm relationship evolves between him and Amvrosya. He falls asleep during prayer. With the book in his lap. The book he has begged so to get, the book he labours at harder than any physical thing in the house is his entrance to the world. Now he has fallen asleep and gently she walks over and turns the page to the current place in the prayer. He wakes up and sees that he is keeping up. It is a gentleness that does not call attention to itself. With caring and respectful resolve, she serves him his meals at a table in the kitchen. He maintains his status and dignity. He is worth loving.

The third actor in the film, the filmmaker with her camera, becomes entangled in a relationship of complex fascinations. The camera gazes at the old man with increasing tenderness and, for his part, he draws the filmmaker into all his deliberations, talking to the camera as if that were the most natural thing in the world. In their long conversations, the small instrument is a prosthesis for memory that, in eagerness and engrossment, is more easily overlooked than a pad on a stenographer's knee, the black octave of note-taking.

Grønkjær's film charts the manifold nature of love.

THE ACTION

Vig lives alone in the derelict main house of picturesque, neo-Renaissance Heshbjerg Castle near Odense. He has the fixed idea that, working with the Patriarchy in Moscow, he can convert the castle into a monastery. When Grønkjær and we first meet him, he is about to go to Russia to discuss his plans with the church leaders. The story begins with him self-consciously posing, as if he were the patriarch, in front of the city's old Christian centre. He makes a deal with the church leaders that a delegation will come and inspect Heshbjerg. The filmmaker and her subject return to Heshbjerg. He starts tidying up, fixing things and decorating. All very haphazardly. Then he waits. The Russians arrive. Two nuns on inspection. One of them is knowledgeable about construction. She has energy and charisma. This is Amvrosya. From her first scene, she

fills the third position in the story and provides its momentum. Immediately, she points out the main problems, the broken heating system and the leaky roof, and from that point on the film picks up those two elements (fire and water) as specific, instantly intelligible storylines. After all, there is a castle to fix. This she deems possible and she promises to speak favourably of the project when she returns to her superiors in Moscow. Months pass. Vig and the film wait. E-mails go back and forth. Vig makes repairs and uncovers further problems with the building. Then the nuns appear, fix up the chapel and kitchen, walk in procession and gently but firmly take over Hesbjerg Castle for God. One icon becomes many. The new beauty lives in order and regularity – times for prayer, for work, meals and rest. Vig has to adapt or remove himself to the margin of events – in dignity, Amvrosya sees to that, while bit by bit she wrenches the construction side of the project away from him. All along, with delicacy, determination and daring, she approaches the most difficult business, current financial issues and, in the longer term, the matter of the inheritance. In this, she lends the film a third line of real suspense, of not knowing, of deferment, thrills. What happens, who will win? During a crucial negotiation, she shows almost musical timing, hitting on the decisive fifth clause of the contract, the distribution of power. In so doing, she establishes a plot point reaching beyond the time period covered by the film. Vig finally gives in and, like a stranger to himself, he ultimately submits to God in the most beautiful of the sacred acts in the chapel. Chaste, poor and obedient.

SHOOTING

Grønkjær shot all the footage herself from the first time she met Vig in 2000. For a while, she lived in a trailer at Hesbjerg, tracking the changing light and endlessly shifting colours of the landscape as a backdrop for the old man's daily life and all his scattered attempts at maintaining his property, which had long since gone to seed. She had a camera on permanent loan from Zentropa Real, while tenaciously, though unsuccessfully, seeking funds for her film. She did not have a lot of footage to show yet. Consultants and editors told her no. Apart from the essential equipment deal, she had no backing. Still, there was a freedom in this phase. She could spontaneously pursue any inclination. Her shooting schedule had no limits. Five years passed this way, as she slowly accumulated footage. Like Vig, she was working on a project most would have abandoned. Vig understood her. He had been working even longer on his own project.

THE EDITING SCRIPT

Grønkjær met the producer Sigrid Dyekjær at an EDN pitching workshop, Twelve 4 the Future. In the, by now, extensive footage, Dyekjær could see the outlines of the film Grønkjær had wanted to make all along. It was the right time to reapply for financing. Development subsidies from the Danish Film Institute enabled Grønkjær, along with the editor, Per K. Kirkegaard, and the dramaturgical consultant, Jens Arentzen, to spend three weeks concentrating on all her shots. Their efforts resulted in an editing script that revealed unexpected layers in the material, defined the three participants' interrelations and in general specified the elements and sequence of the story.



Photo Courtesy Erik Molberg

Pernille Rose Grønkjær.

Now, the film could be financed and the work of finishing it could begin. Kirkegaard was prevented from editing the film, so Grønkjær and Dyekjær started looking for a new editor and made a fortunate discovery in Pernille Bech Christensen. Working from the editing script, Christensen gave the film its drawn out, lingering pace, highlighted the beauty of shots that struck her and maintained a balance in the acts of the three ambitions, the development of the three main characters.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Vig changes over the years. In the film, he describes a dramatic arc from something approaching humbleness, as he prepares the building's transformation, to uncertainty and outright crisis, and ultimately on to resolve and readiness for battle before the final negotiations regarding the future finances and transfer of ownership.

Amvrosya changes in an almost opposite direction. When she begins her work, she is assertive and officious. As the work progresses, her demeanour softens and she shows ever more tolerance and love in dealing with Vig. She sets her mind to the important things, fixing the two basic construction problems. Her



The monastery.

firmness at the key negotiation is even charming. She is secure about her task and unshakeable in her conviction that the other party is a good person.

Finally, we start seeing more of the filmmaker, who steps out from behind the camera and actively interferes. Her attitude changes from curiosity to comprehensive understanding of what is going on and eventually she takes a stand. She increasingly takes Amvrosya's side. The filmmaker, then, interferes in the film. Leaving her camera on the tripod, Grønkjær steps into the frame to help Vig lift a heavy rug. Weighing in and making arguments, she influences events and changes their course.

KEY SCENES

The presentation of the icon at the nuns' first visit is a key scene. Another comes later on. Vig is in front of the greenhouse, hoeing. From behind the camera, the filmmaker asks him:

"Why is it so interesting to have a monastery here?"

Vig answers: "It is an old ambition of mine to leave a legacy. That's a banal thing, of course. One would like to do something that persists – it is an ambition."

"I don't get it," the filmmaker challenges.

"Huh?"

"I don't get it," she repeats.

"You don't get it?"

"No."

He looks up from what he is doing.

"You don't want to make a film that becomes part of history, a documentary?"

"Um, yes," she admits.

"You want to make something of quality. There you go." And he continues his gardening. "There you go," he repeats and crouches to deal with a weed.

THE CHOICE OF TITLE

"The title has evolved into a singular standout detail of any work. A beautiful title, an exciting title, is like a grand model for undertaking the work, as well as for the reader's, the viewer's, expectations," the Danish writer Peter Seeberg once wrote. A title is a plan, or a reference to a key scene, or, in this case, the physical setting for the events, the old castle and its fate. In Danish, Grønkjær's film is called *Slottet* (The Castle). The title describes the physical setting for the events, the old house and its fate. Moreover, the film is an essay about a great cultural shift, the pain of parting with something and the joy of creating. For oneself, for the idea and for God. Pernille Rose Grønkjær's film is a deep meditation on the idea of a lifework. The film ends without answering the question of whether Vig's opus will be completed now that it is in Amvrosya's hands? As a work of God. There is honesty in the documentary depiction: we enter in the middle of the story and we leave in the middle of the story. The story continues, while the film stands like a statue in the gardens at Hesbjerg. ✦