Monsieur Vincent: Advisor to the Wealthy, Servant of the Poor

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

"Monsieur Vincent, directed by Maurice Cloche, is a film which shows the selfless journey of Vincent De Paul as he dedicates his life to helping the poor, advising the wealthy, and revitalizing the Catholic Church throughout France. With an ideological approach, the delivery of themes pertaining to charity, religion, and social class can be analyzed. In particular the bold, charitable character of Vincent challenges the beliefs of even the most selfless individuals."

This essay on religion is available in Verbum: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol12/iss2/9
Monsieur Vincent: Advisor to the Wealthy, Servant of the Poor

Introduction

*Monsieur Vincent*, directed by Maurice Cloche, is a film which shows the selfless journey of Vincent De Paul as he dedicates his life to helping the poor, advising the wealthy, and revitalizing the Catholic Church throughout France. With an ideological approach, the delivery of themes pertaining to charity, religion, and social class can be analyzed. In particular the bold, charitable character of Vincent challenges the beliefs of even the most selfless individuals.

A Critical Essay

Instead of beginning at an earlier time in Vincent De Paul’s life, the film picks up in 1617 halfway through his life with him arriving in Chatillon-les-Dombes as the new curé of an abandoned parish. After a discouraging welcome, Vincent buries a plague victim, earns the respect of the lord and townspeople, and ultimately revitalizes the Catholic faith of the town before returning to Paris at the request of Madame de Gondi. After the de Gondi family gives him enough money to fund his Congregation of the Mission, he is appointed chaplain to the King's Galleys but eventually resigns after his reluctant acceptance. The rest of the film depicts Vincent's service and the founding of the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and a
hospital for the prisoners of the galleys as well as the struggles that accompanied these tasks. 

*Monsieur Vincent* won the Special Achievement Academy Award in 1948 "largely thanks to the superb performance by Pierre Fresnay" (Wolfe, n.p.).

One of the most dominant messages of the film *Monsieur Vincent* is that French society in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, concerned with plague, was overall not a joyous time for the majority of the population. Furthermore, this era in France as depicted in the film also exhibits extreme separation between the poor and the wealthy with most people concerned with worldly pleasures rather than their faith. Cloche uses several camera techniques to emphasize this anti-humanitarian mentality that most people had in these late medieval times.

The first scene of the film when Vincent arrives in the unhappy town of Chatillon is one of several thoroughly planned sequences of shots by Cloche showing the selfishness of society. While the act of Vincent bombarded by stones as he walks through town is sufficient to show the townspeople's distaste for visitors, their cowardice is embellished by how the scene is shot. Alternating shots of Vincent dodging stones at street level to empty second story windows with rustling leaves and closing doors shot from his point of view are the only evidence for the source of rocks being hurled at the back of his head. By not showing the faces of the culprits, the people of society are generalized as cowardly and only concerned for themselves. This seems to have been the trend of society at this time in history, and this same interpretation of Cloche's film has been presented in *The New York Times* by reviewer Bosley Crowther who wrote: "The producers have put into the film some poignant and shocking demonstrations of inhumanity in seventeenth-century France" (Crowther n.p.). Another scene that expresses the self-centeredness of society takes place in the house of Monsieur Benier's house. By using extravagant costumes for the
wealthy individuals inside, and dialogue that confirms they are partying their cares away, it is clear that the director wants them to appear as stuck-up snobs too concerned with avoiding the plague to help a sick, innocent woman. The most powerful part of this scene is a shot/reverse shot that uses a camera angle looking down on Vincent from the window as he leaves to visit the sick woman. This angle used by Cloche can be interpreted as a depiction of the social difference between the humble Vincent and the selfish upper class that look down upon acts of righteousness from their higher position. This scene has appropriately been described as "a stark dramatic contrast between the appalling physical and moral poverty of St. Vincent’s times and the realism and moral authority with which Vincent confronts them" (Greydanus, n.p.) which supports the previously suggested ideological purpose of this film. Overall, in the first scene of the film the director does well through camera angles, shot sequences, and an effective mis-en-scene to portray the anti-humanitarian mentality of French society during the time of St. Vincent De Paul’s life.

In addition to emphasizing the presence of a socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor in France during Vincent’s life, there are several features in the film by which Maurice Cloche conveys the importance of charity and how Vincent’s work helps to bridge this gap. In particular, one feature of design throughout the film is the use of zoomed out shots that capture both Vincent and the poor individuals that he interacts with. After the characters become acquainted in a particular scene, the frame encompassing Vincent and the poor emphasizes understanding, spiritual, and emotional connections with each person he serves. One example of this is when Vincent lets a homeless man sleep in his room. The shot of them talking and then sleeping in the same frame shows that Vincent is doing more than merely giving this man a place to stay; he is lifting the spirit of the poor man by acting as his equal. This scene also possesses
another element used by the director to express how Vincent puts the less fortunate before him to make them feel more accepted in society. This element is the positioning of the homeless man in the foreground of the shot while they are sleeping. This element is also seen in the scene when the Ladies of Charity have an intervention claiming they cannot take in anymore children. In this shot the director positions Vincent behind the table where he places an infant so the viewer again sees Vincent in the background. This asserts his support for the wellbeing of the infant even though the Ladies of Charity do not wish to take it in. These shots with Vincent positioned behind the poor are crucial to conveying the concept that he was a man of unquestionable devotion to the poor since he literally always put their interests before his own.

With respect to the wealthy, the same shots of face to face interactions with Vincent occur with them as when he interacts with the poor. This overall trend in encounters establishes the idea that Vincent considered the poor and the wealthy to be on equal ground and it helps to create the theme that people of all classes should be treated the same. This same devotion can be found in many of his writings where he says things like the following: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by the living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ" (Scott, n.p.) Just as Cloche tries to get across, Vincent believed that it is important for all people to renounce their own status (especially the wealthy) and devote themselves to the poor as Christ did. Just as one would be challenged to act like Jesus, Vincent's demeanor with the poor in this film causes the viewers to question their own ideals and attitude towards the poor. Viewers may ask themselves: Would I be able to live in the same impoverished conditions as he did? And more importantly: Would I share my room with a sick homeless person? At any rate, the result is that the film's depiction of Vincent's actions establishes him as a role model for acting charitably,
and according to an analysis on the French historical context of certain films, *Monsieur Vincent* is one of several films that offer "positive, heroic national male role models during the post-war restoration of patriarchal authority" (Brown n.p.).

Perhaps the most important outcome of the film *Monsieur Vincent* as directed by Cloche is the establishment of the unmatched determination and dedication of Vincent De Paul to serving the poor. Scenes that show Vincent's struggles to get the wealthy to acknowledge and help the poor are the most useful in showing these traits. One feature these scenes have in common is an intense depiction of his determination by slowly zooming in on Pierre Fresnay's face, who "brings Vincent vividly to life" (Wolfe, n.p.). This camera technique is used in scenes such as when Vincent is treating the wound of the lord of Chatillon and is explaining to him that he needs to care for his poor townspeople. This scene, among others, also has another feature of design which is the shifting of the camera to be directly in the concerned gaze of Vincent as it is zoomed in on his face. Both of these elements used by Cloche, along with Fresnay's performance, are extremely powerful and establish the devoted and concerned character of Vincent which has been described as "a rare delicacy of feeling" (Leonard, 1937 p. 8). The same intensity is carried by these features of design throughout the film as he interacts with the wealthy as if they owe a great debt to the poor. The bold conversations Vincent has with powerful people who trust his advice establish how he is able to gather so much funding and support for his missions. As one reviewer put it: "Vincent was, in point of fact, a sort of Steve Jobs (minus the arrogance) for Catholic charities in his day, a man who networked relentlessly", and this film definitely shows why the rich regarded him so highly. With that said, *Monsieur Vincent* still manages to remind the viewer that Vincent was not comfortable living in luxury while there were poor people living in misery. In fact, the previously mentioned shots that put
him and the poor on level ground remind the viewer that he preferred to be among the poor and it has been rightfully said that "he had no desire for the dignities to which he might have aspired" (Leonard, 1937 p. 21). Lastly, with all of the opportunities that he is presented in the film to live a lavish lifestyle, the director forces the viewer to consider if he or she would be able to live as modestly and as diligently for the poor as St. Vincent De Paul did.

**Conclusion**

Through the analysis of the film *Monsieur Vincent*, the ideological intentions and methods used by the director have been interpreted. Through the use of camera techniques and various features of design in the film, director Maurice Cloche conveys the remarkable character of St. Vincent De Paul, the society of France at the time, and the importance of charity which challenges the moral beliefs of the viewer.

**Bibliography**