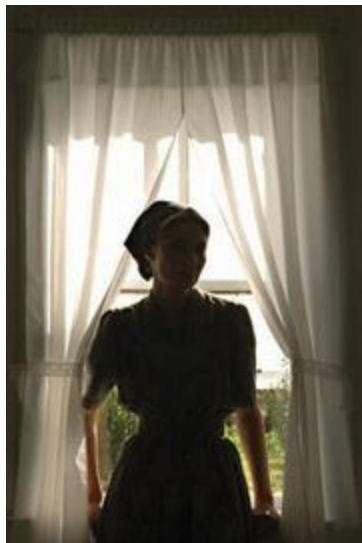


Silent Light

Cornelio Wall Fehr, Miriam Toews, and Maria Pankratz star in a film written and directed by Carlos Reygadas.

By Josef Woodard

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On rare occasions, a film can manage to capture and telegraph the ambience of what's to come with a single opening shot. Such is the case with Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas's remarkable, slow, and hauntingly beautiful film, *Silent Light*. In a gradually evolving, yawning shot of a night slowly melting into daylight, we are lulled immediately into the film's alternate sense of time. We land at the breakfast table of a large Mennonite family, heads bowed in silent prayer, before the troubled husband alludes to the central, churning point of tension in the narrative: he is in love with another woman. Within a few minutes, we get the picture. But God is in the details and the landscape.



Silent Light follows a Mennonite family that must deal with its patriarch falling in love with another woman.

On the surface, *Silent Light* concerns infidelity, spiritual torment, and unhurried natural grace in a Mennonite community in northern Mexico, but surfaces tell only part of the story. Reygadas conveys a sense of stillness and deep appreciation for the willful simplicity of the Mennonite life, a "radical pacifist" religious order founded in the 15th century whose self-sustaining communities are separated from the distractions of the modern world.

Silent Light further suggests that Reygadas is a something of a cinematic visionary in training, not content to heed conventional structures and clichés in his filmic vocabulary. His striking film *Battle in Heaven* mixed sexual and political unrest, explicit scenes, and filmic poetry. *Silent*

Light, by contrast, lives up to its title by savoring light and quietude, and telling a story of emotional conflict without salacious content. There is no musical score and little dialogue, making what little sound is present all the more heightened.

Reygadas worked mostly with non-professional actors from the Mennonite community, including the impressively stoic yet anguished Cornelio Wall Fehr as the protagonist, Johan, and Maria Pankratz as the “other” woman. The role of Johan’s wife is played by a different sort of non-actor: the fantastic Miriam Toews, a famed Winnipeg author whose own background was in the Mennonite community.

Elements of either magic realism or spiritual transcendence slip into this otherwise naturalistic storyline, and the ravishing ending shot provides both closure and continuity with the opening sequence. All in all, *Silent Light* is a breathtaking and hypnotic visit to another world, another way of being, and a new filmic language-in-progress.