

Above Us, the Sky

Lin Li, 2015

This film is about Brian Quail – a retired Glaswegian teacher who has been campaigning against nuclear weapons for decades and has been arrested numerous times for his non-violent direct actions. It is a portrait of an ordinary citizen who engages in not so ordinary actions which put him in confrontation with the state. Whilst focussing on an individual and his peace activism, the film raises questions which have wider sociopolitical and more universal significance, such as: the issue of nuclear (dis)armament, and an individual citizen's responsibility and ability in influencing state policies. At a different level, this film also touches on more psychological and philosophical questions - what constitutes a person and is the person a coherent, unitary subject?

How do we get to know a person? We listen, and we look. The person has a voice. Brian's voice is the thread that weaves through the whole film. We listen to his voice – its sonic quality and the messages it conveys. We can tell from his voice his cultural background, his values and beliefs, and not least, his passion - a passion for peace fueled by his Christian faith. We see his passion too in his political actions, and we form an impression of what sort of person he is from the way he acts and interacts with other people, and also through the space he has created for himself.

A person is embedded in and defined by the space he lives in – be it public or private, social or physical space, and increasingly the cyberspace where the public and the private converge. While the public space is one which is contested by Brian's actions, and in which his demand for changes has been thwarted by state control, he has relatively more freedom in shaping the private space of his own home, just as he has in constructing the narrative of his life. The intimate domestic space is thus an extension of the identity of the person who moulds it, and plays an important part in our process of getting to know him.

Through the objects he puts in his home, the person projects, consciously or subconsciously, who he is and what he holds dear, and at the same time creates a space which, as Gaston Bachelard puts it, "shelters the dreamer"¹. Brian is a dreamer, one who dreams of peace, justice and love, and a better world for future generations. It is a dream founded on the belief in the meaning and sanctity of life. His reverence for the divine is reflected in the objects in his home which bears the marks of a holy place. Indeed the most intimate space of a person is a holy one and should be treated with respect as we enter it.

Getting to know a person is like peeling onions. Layer by layer, we try to get to the core, but we must be prepared to be affected by the peeling process. This process, by revealing the inner world of another person with his vulnerability and aloneness, may remind us of our own pain, regrets and immortality. It could be uncomfortable too if the person's views and actions contradict our own, call into question our idea of peace, or arouse our sense of helplessness *vis a vis* the machinery of the powers that be. How should we respond when we are confronted with the argument that the illusory security and peace of the country we live in is built on the capability to annihilate lives on a massive scale?

Ultimately this film is about life and love. We have glimpses of another person's life and the love he shows as a peace activist and as a father. This perhaps would make us ponder a little more about the fundamental essence of human life and what we live for.

¹ Bachelard, Gaston (1994) *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.