Film

Camino

> A quick test of the assertion that enjoyment outweighs pain in this world, or that they are at any rate balanced, would be to compare the feelings of an animal engaged in eating another with those of the animal being eaten.
>
> *Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)*

> God calls us through what happens during our day, through the suffering and happiness of the people we live with.
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> *Josemaria Escriva (1902–1975)*

What we are about to see, an onscreen inscription informs us, has been "inspired by real events". We are in Pamplona in the northeast of Spain. It is June, 2001, and pouring with rain. A priest is administering the last rites. The room is packed: nurses, doctors, and members of a religious order spill into the corridor. In the bed lies a 12-year-old girl—Camino—her head is covered, her eyes are closed, and a thin tube stretches across her face. "Someone's crying", she says softly. "We're all crying", her mother answers, "with joy, and envy; with envy because you're going to Jesus". The onlookers bow their heads in prayer. "The black one has come", Camino whispers, "he says: break a leg everyone".

Morphine-induced murmurings, many would conclude. Others might contend that this was the final agony of a latter-day saint: "in loving memory of Alexia Gonzalez who died in Pamplona in 1985 and is currently in the process of beatification" reads the dedication at the end of *Camino*. The film itself is too shrewd to declare its hand this early in the game, but as things start to play out, we see that all is not how it seems. Jesus, in particular, is not quite who they think He is.

It is the Catholic Church in general—and the Opus Dei sect specifically (although it is not mentioned by name)—at which director Javier Fesser takes aim in the inventive and intellectually charged *Camino*. The action shifts to Madrid, 5 months earlier. Camino—long-haired, wide-eyed—is in good spirits. "I'm going through pre-adolescence", she gleefully tells her friend, "it's an illness I've got, but my mother suffers". She does have some problems with her spine—"it feels like there's a thorn in my neck", she says in a reference hinting at Christian suffering. Her doctor is unconcerned: "a contracture in the neck muscles, nothing to worry about". He is wrong about that.

And so Camino busies herself with the problems of pre-adolescence. She falls in love, gossips, and bounces around her parents' apartment. Her father, Jose, watches her contentedly. His is a kindly, quiet, and confused presence, excellently portrayed by Mariano Venancio. Camino's mother, Gloria (Carme Elias), has fallen under the sway of a strict Catholicism. But it is a nuanced performance—Gloria silently disapproves of her daughter's flirtation with the theatre, for example, but she does not interfere.

Camino's sister, Nuria, is absent. She lives in a joyless religious community as a numerary, a junior member of Opus Dei. She places small stones in her shoes, and refuses to sit down on public transport. One of the elders cautions her not to dwell on her erstwhile family life: "the devil, who is no fool, uses precisely the people we love to keep us away from the task God has charged us with".

After Camino suffers a fractured spine, it becomes clear that this is a no mere curvature. The problem is eventually identified: a tumour has pressed down upon the spinal cord and caused it to fracture. The cancer has a name: rhabdomyosarcoma.

All of which serves to set up a fascinating and moving discussion of the nature and purpose of suffering. In this, paediatric cancer is an apt emblem, particularly from a Christian perspective. Why does God—who we assume to be just and merciful—permit His children to suffer the tortures of a body that is turning on itself?

Opus Dei—which translates as "work of God"—was founded by Josemaria Escriva in 1928. Escriva—who was canonised by Pope John Paul II in 2002—taught that through their everyday activities human beings can move closer to the Almighty. This encompasses sickness: "God is doing a wondrous thing for this girl and whatever He intends is for her good", the priest informs Gloria and Jose. Gloria agrees, gratefully seizing upon Camino's plight as an expression of God's will: "I thank Him every day for our daughter's illness", she tells the increasingly desperate Jose. She offers one of her daughter's operations for "all the children suffering in the world".

Nowhere does this sanctification of suffering seem more tragic than the scene in which Nuria hurries to attend Camino's deathbed. A taxi pulls up alongside her, but she eschews it, preferring to wait for the bus, on which, of course, she stands. Not that *Camino* is some kind of atheistic screed, it doesn't deny God's presence—in fact, certain passages are positively transcendent—but it questions, gently and intelligently, the answers that fundamentalist Christianity has to offer. It is an urgent and compelling film, cleverly paced and richly photographed. "In the depth of winter", wrote Albert Camus, "I finally learned that there was within me an invincible summer". The pleasure of *Camino* lies in watching our charming lead character discover the same thing.

Talha Burki

Directed by Javier Fesser
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Spanish with English subtitles

Camino was screened at the London Spanish Film Festival on Sept 18, 2009

For more information see http://www.caminolapelicula.com/english/