



School of Life

Filmmuseum Potsdam 15.–19. Mai 2006

Pädagogisches Dossier

Village Life

UK 2005

Director: Nick O'Dwyer, Rachel Bliss, Producer: Nick O'Dwyer, Rachel Bliss

Running Time: 61 minutes

Documentary

Village Life is the director's cut of the Channel 4 documentary The Strangest Village in Britain.

Strangest Village in Britain has been nominated by Televisual Magazine as one of the best 'Contemporary Documentaries' of 2005.

„A fascinating and charming documentary ...“ (Time Out)

SYNOPSIS

Botton Village - tucked away high on England's north Yorkshire moors – is part soap opera, part Village of the Damned. It's a bold social experiment where 136 special needs 'villagers' with learning difficulties live in a commune with 100 'co-workers'. Partly because of its isolation, Botton is a place of high emotion where outbursts of bizarre behaviour are part of the routine and benignly tolerated. Landmark Films was given remarkably free access to Botton and Village Life - filmed over a cold winter - is a truly extraordinary mix of conflict, emotion and weirdness. The film tracks a group of villagers through emotionally difficult events in their lives. It's an unusually 'pure' documentary and unfolds in a series of observed scenes, allowing special needs people to speak for themselves, unmediated by experts or educational therapists. The result is a film which is raw, honest, provocative and sometimes unsettling.

INHALTSANGABE (deutsch)

In Botton Village, einer Siedlung im nordenglischen Yorkshire-Moor leben und arbeiten 136 Menschen mit Lernschwierigkeiten, Dow-Syndrom und anderen Behinderungen in einer Kommune zusammen mit 100 „normalen“ Mitarbeitern. Der Film zeigt einen Teil dieser Dorfbewohner und die Bindungen und Konflikte, die sich in dieser isolierten und doch freien Art des Zusammenlebens gebildet haben. Obwohl Village Life ein Dokumentarfilm ist, erinnert er streckenweise an eine Seifenoper, denn er zeigt die kleinen und großen Freuden und Dramen des alltäglichen Lebens dieser „besonderen“ Dorfgemeinschaft, die so besonders eigentlich gar nicht ist.

THEMEN

Umgang mit Menschen mit Behinderungen, isoliertes und geschütztes Zusammenleben vs. Integration in die Gesamtgesellschaft, verschiedene Arten von Lebensgemeinschaften, „normal“ vs. „anders“

Die Dokumentation zeigt das Zusammenleben von „normalen“ Menschen und von Menschen, die „anders“ sind. Dabei zeigt sich zunächst einmal, dass Menschen, die im „normalen“ gesellschaftlichen Leben Schwierigkeiten haben, dennoch einen wertvollen Beitrag leisten können und genauso über Träume, Ängste, Ehrgeiz und Kreativität verfügen wie andere Menschen auch. Unter anderem auf Grundlage der Ausstrahlung von Strangest Village in Britain ist darüber diskutiert worden, ob Menschen mit Lernschwierigkeiten oder Behinderungen besser in einer isolierten und geschützten Umgebung wie Botton Village zu ihrem Recht kommen. Denn dort stehen sie nicht am Rande, sondern im Mittelpunkt einer Gemeinschaft. Oder sollte besser versucht werden, sie in die Gesamtgesellschaft zu integrieren? Diese Fragen werfen weitere Fragen auf: Was bedeutet „Gesellschaft“ überhaupt? Wer wird aus welchen Gründen ausgeschlossen oder entmündigt? Wer hat zu entscheiden, wer oder was und warum etwas „normal“ oder „nicht normal“ ist? Darüber hinaus könnte man anhand des Filmes auch darüber diskutieren, ob das Filmen und Zeigen „andersartiger“ Menschen nicht oft zur Freak-Show mutiert, die voyeuristische Neigungen befriedigt und eher zur Verstärkung von Stereotypisierung und Ausgrenzung beiträgt.

STILISTISCHE MITTEL

Die Kamera bzw. die Filmemacher bleiben, wie in den meisten „klassischen“ Dokumentarfilmen zumeist distanziert, beobachtend und „objektiv“. Die subjektive Perspektive wird nur dann offensichtlich gemacht, wenn einer der Protagonisten selbst die Kamera in die Hand nimmt, um einige der Bewohner zu interviewen. Diese Stellen sind mit einem roten Punkt und einer Bildunterschrift kenntlich gemacht (in etwa wie früher beim „Kamerakind“ im deutschen Fernsehen). Interessant wird der Film in dieser Hinsicht noch an einer anderen Stelle: Eine der Villagers hat panische Angst davor, auf dem Weg von der Arbeit nach Hause auszurutschen und hinzufallen. Daher soll ein anderer Bewohner sie abholen und begleiten. Da er die Verabredung aber nicht einhält, muss nach einer längeren Wartezeit schließlich das Kamerateam eingreifen und die Frau nach Hause begleiten. Das Team wird somit unfreiwilliger Protagonist der Szenerie und die angestrebte Trennung zwischen objektiver Beobachtung und aktiver Teilnahme wird auf anschauliche Weise aufgehoben.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

„At Camphill we build intentional communities with people of all ages who live with disabilities, recognizing the potential, dignity, spiritual integrity and contribution of each and every individual. For over 60 years, Camphill communities all over the world have challenged the notion of what it means to have a developmental or learning disability, and have shown that each of us is a unique and essential link in the circle of humanity.“

(The Association of Camphill Communities in Great Britain)

Botton Village offers an environment encompassing many endeavours, integrating people in need of special understanding into a rich and dignified way of life in which their cultural, social and economic contributions are central to the community. Established on the concept of mutual co-operation between adults with special needs and others, as pioneered by the founder of Camphill, Dr. Karl König, Botton's vision remains to create a village based on the need of every human being for freedom, equality and brotherhood, guided by the social insights of Rudolf Steiner. Local involvement is extensive, thanks to the community's many employees and the numerous business ventures it has helped to initiate. Botton Village has served as agent for a number of employment schemes sponsored by the Government and still maintains close links with projects for the unemployed and homeless in Whitby. It has also 'seeded out' to found other nearby Camphill centres in Malton and Middlesbrough.

ARTICLE ON THE STRANGEST VILLAGE IN BRITAIN

Village communities for people with learning disabilities should be closed, argues the disability lobby.

It is not just the population that makes this village different. Botton is a Steiner community, so every aspect of life, from farming to healthcare, is underpinned by the teachings of the Austrian philosopher. Its secluded location - Botton is several miles from the next village - and unconventional way of life give the place an air of intrigue, so that when you descend into the valley for the first time it's akin to entering a secret world.

Established in 1955, Botton is one of 11 village communities in Britain owned by the Camphill Village Trust. It is partly state-funded, but the community bears a closer resemblance to a kibbutz than a care facility. Disabled residents, or "villagers", as they are known, live in extended family homes together with carers, or "co-workers". Everybody shares household chores and "families" sit down together three times a day to eat. People work on the farms and in the village's numerous craft workshops, but nobody gets a wage. Instead they receive a weekly allowance that covers basic needs, and have an equal stake in deciding how the community is run. For all its differences, Botton feels like an ordinary village. At nine o'clock every morning, dozens of residents can be seen making their way to work along the winding dirt track that joins Botton's craft workshops. At the centre of the village is a bakery, creamery and a coffee house, which the villagers help manage. There's a church and a hall that doubles as a cinema, and entertainment is laid on every night of the week. There's also a thriving adult skills and education programme. Fundamental to people's outlook is the belief that disability does not matter. And it seems to translate. After a few hours here, it is very easy to forget that Botton is a village for the learning disabled. "We don't label people here," insists one carer. "It's the person we see, not the disability."

However, not everything is as rosy as it seems. The long-term future of such communities is far from secure. The head of the British Council of Disabled People (BCODP) says such village communities should be closed down and the government seems, at best, ambiguous about them. The consensus, among the disability lobby at least, is that village communities are outmoded, and that the way forward is "supported living", where people are integrated into wider society. Nick Poole, village elder and spokesman at Botton Village, not surprisingly, finds such views frustrating. "Why shouldn't village communities like ours be used as a model for future provisions?" says Poole, a 30-year resident. "We have 50 years' experience of caring for vulnerable people, and those who live here value us highly."

There are around 3,000 people living in 73 village communities in Britain. Few are as big as Botton, but all work on the principle that segregated community living benefits people with special needs. "People with learning disabilities have an enormous contribution to make, socially and humanly," adds Poole. "But in a competitive, intellectual climate they are disadvantaged. We are trying to create a way of life that does justice to their humanity."

The disability movement's opposition to such communities is based on the belief that segregation is ultimately harmful to achieving a just and equal society. Andy Rickell, director of BCODP, believes that segregation is the easy way out. "I see no place for village communities, and I would like to see them closed down. Long term, I don't think they help anybody. They are acknowledging that the rest of society doesn't yet include people with learning difficulties. But instead of challenging this, they are accepting it and going elsewhere, so as not to bother anybody."

Richard Kramer is head of policy at social care charity Turning Point. He acknowledges that village communities have certain advantages, such as better access to daytime activities and a reduced risk of exposure to verbal abuse and crime. Nevertheless, he reinforces the message that supported living is the way forward. "Village communities fall short of giving people complete choice and control over where they live," he says. "They don't promote independence." Kramer adds that efforts should be focused on changing society to accommodate the needs of the vulnerable. "If we are serious about tackling negative attitudes towards people with learning disabilities and saying that they should have the same rights as everybody else, then living in a village community runs counter to that overall principle."

Or does it? Botton might be in the middle of nowhere, but it is not completely isolated. In the past, the area was a secluded haven for the monks of Rosedale, and, later, for the Quaker families who had settled in the valley to escape the suspicion and heckling of town folk. In contrast, today's community is a driving force in the Whitby area. It generates a significant amount of trade and commerce for local business, and plays host to several thousand visitors a year. Botton has also kept up with the times. Its houses, workshops and facilities are built on modern designs; its people appear open minded and there's a strong international presence - I meet people from Eastern Europe, Germany and Singapore there. In other respects, the village is ahead of the game. It uses biodynamic agriculture (said to be healthier than organic farming), and a pioneering system of healthcare based on anthroposophy;

Rudolph Steiner's belief that creative activities are psychologically valuable.

Given the government's reluctance to intervene in the debate, the long-term prospects of village communities is anybody's guess, says David Congdon, head of external relations at disability charity Mencap.

Poole has come to expect criticism for Botton's methods. "We hear some social workers say we are a metamorphosis of the old Victorian institution, locked away in a ghetto," he says. "Well, there is some truth in that, but as long as society is unwilling to offer real care and understanding to those who are vulnerable, places like this will be justified. If more of the values we espouse were accepted as mainstream, there would be no need for this place."

Botton certainly doesn't feel like an institution. You are unlikely to find sentimentality or pity towards people with special needs here. Everybody in the village seems to be treated with equal respect and shown dignity. The only patronising overtone I found was the view that television has a negative influence and a consensus had agreed that it should be banned.

"We say to our critics, 'Please come and visit us, open your eyes and look,'" says Poole. "In many respects, we are meeting the objectives or ideals of care in the community. People are respected, given space, independence, purpose, a meaningful way of life, a job to do. What else can we ask for?... You may say that's dewy-eyed, but it is just a conviction that what we are doing is needed, and that the people who live here are fulfilled. Not just that they are fed, have a roof over their head and lots of recreational opportunities. But that they are fulfilled at a deeper level as co-creators of this community."

Guardian Online, 31/3/2004