

Szkice filmoznawcze

Alicja Helman

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8266-6038>

Wydział Zarządzania i Komunikacji Społecznej
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

Tian Zhuangzhuang: An Author Haunted by the Images*

Key words: biopic, minority genre, ethnographic cinema, religion, ritual

Słowa kluczowe: biografia filmowa, gatunek „minority”, kino etnograficzne, religia, rytuał

Introduction

The last film Tian Zhuangzhuang made was 2009's *The Warrior and the Wolf* (*Láng Zāi Jě*). Not until 2015 has he participated, as one of three directors, in a blockbuster *Lady of The Dynasty* (*Wángcháo de Nǚrén Yáng Guifēi*), where his contribution is difficult, if not impossible to isolate. As the aficionados of his talent had accurately predicted, the director never managed to put himself on the map again, amidst the transformations of China's Film Industry that took a turn towards commercialization, conquest of foreign markets, and competition with Western production at home. Unable to find funds or producers, let alone audiences for his “cinematic project,” Tian did not only refuse to make films as forced upon him, but did not need to; most probably, he could not.

His output proper – counting out student films – can be narrowed down to the period between the years 1985 (*On the Hunting Ground* [*Lièchǎng zhā sā*]) and 2006 (*The Go Master* [*Wú Qīngyuán*]), encompassing projects consistent with his views, temperament, and an idiosyncratic language of film art. However, even within this timeframe, we will find features from which Tian evidently distances himself. We ought to distinguish four feature films from the period 1987–1991, which Tian was attached to as director, rather than perceiving them as works of his own choosing. Which of the entries in his filmography, then, are entirely Tian's authorial efforts? Undeniably, among them are: *On the Hunting Ground*, *The Horse Thief* (*Dào mǎ zéi*, 1986), *The Blue Kite* (*Lán fēngzhēng*, 1993), *Springtime in the Small Town* (*Xiǎochéng zhī chūn*, 2002), *Delamu* (*Chá mǎ gǔdào: Dé lǎ mǔ*, 2004) and *The Go Master*. It may not be much, but enough to safeguard Tian a prominent place not just in the history of Chinese cinema, but in its global counterpart as well. He has been recognized and appreciated ever since.

* This article was funded by National Science Centre, decision number DEC-2012/05/B/HS2/04058.

Horse Thief

When analysing and interpreting Tian Zhuangzhuang's filmic *oeuvre*, I intend to capture a specific idiolect – the poetics and style that are especially recognizable in the paradocumentary character of some of his films. In my opinion, those features that are distinctive of his works can just as well be found – although in lesser degree – in his commercial ventures, coming from the “middle period” or even in features like *The Warrior and the Wolf*. Tian's approach was that of a discoverer, or voyager who looks at a *terra incognita* with an unprejudiced eye, refusing to fall back upon a pre-established system of beliefs; unbiased and all the more unwilling to succumb to generic conventions or meet audience's expectations. Surely, André Bazin would have found in Tian the perfect student, whereas Siegfried Kracauer or adepts of *cinéma vérité* might have felt affinity for this kindred spirit, because in Tian's cinema, sensations (feelings, observation) take precedence over knowledge. Such choices are not only due to the director's understanding of film's intrinsic role, but to his appreciation of Chinese aesthetics, which had been influencing artistic demeanour through the ages – their representational predilection to capturing the essence residing in emotions conjured up by the subject. It was never Tian's intention to either expound anything, or to comment. He was not keen on telling stories, and would rather picture – without referring to literature, anecdote, or calling upon professional actors – what had touched him to the core; his fascinations and discoveries, things witnessed for the first time. Neither an expert on Mongolia, Tibet, or the Silk Road, let alone a master in the game of Go, Tian had to experience first-hand what was lying ahead for his audiences to witness for the first time. Be it surprise, illumination, or pure emotional upheaval, he wanted to share it with the audience.

Even if there were literary originals at the outset of his films, it was not for their plots that Tian's interest was concerned. What was truly essential was the idea, the point of departure, which would undergo visual transformations in order to take on new, unprecedented forms. The sole exception from this rule were *The Street Players* (*Gǔ shū yìrén*, 1987) – a relatively faithful adaptation of a novel by Lao She. First one in a string of commissioned films, through which Tian was proving his contractors, and no less to himself, that – if necessary – he is able to comply to standards of cinematic storytelling.

Due to his avoidance of reluctance to classical cinema conventions, Tian was not used to shooting typical documentaries. *Delamu* might be the closest he ever got to the genre, a documentary feature *tout court*. Unlike *On the Hunting Ground* and *The Horse Thief*, both of which employ found motifs – rather than conventional plot elements, taken from vast repositories of human history – they are cinematic utterances that are quintessentially his. Tian's takes on the biopic, like *Li Lianying: The Imperial Eunuch* (*Dà Tàijiān Lǐ Liányīng*, 1991) and *The Go Master*, completely break away from pre-established rules of the genre. Creating evocative psychological portraits, he cares very little about historical background, linear continuity, or conveying information in traditional fashion.

Any kind of search for sources of inspiration that might have given rise to Tian's cinema, would amount to a book in itself. The director pursues a new film language to express themes previously absent from Chinese filmmaking, while at the same time he stays deeply rooted in Chinese culture and tradition, looking for ways in which to revitalize it. Together with other filmmakers from the Fifth Generation who studied between 1978 and 1982, he explores Western cinema and the afterthought accompanying it, yet he prefers to draw from familiar, native sources. *Expressis verbis*, he refers to authors of the Third Generation, particularly Shui Hua. Particularly, *Springtime in a Small Town* was made as a homage to the old masters of Chinese cinema.

Indisputably, Tian Zhuangzhuang is an author whose belief in images should not be overlooked. The images in question are not meant to express the directors's artistic concepts, but those yet to be found, discovered; one needs to succumb to their internal logic. What underlies Tian's filmmaking is the aesthetics of silent cinema, with its ideal of the autonomy of the image, as it needs not rely on written or spoken word. *The Blue Kite* and *Springtime in a Small Town* are definitely two most highly regarded masterpieces, with an abundance of academic papers and awards on their account. I believe, however, that it is *The Horse Thief*, rather than the other two, that expresses Tian's artistic programme in the fullest, most captivating way.

The Horse Thief is among the most extraordinary films ever realized under the auspices of Chinese cinematography. Despite its poor availability, it has received cult status in the West (although mainly in connoisseur circles). Eventually, it was issued on a Chinese DVD with English subtitles, thus becoming widely available to anyone interested. Having gone considerable hardships at the production stage, its distribution proved to be a much more burdensome task. While typical Chinese films are distributed in one hundred copies, *The Horse Thief* counted only seven; still, a considerable improvement in comparison to the directors's previous work, *On the Hunting Ground* – not more than a single copy was produced, thus the film is virtually impossible to obtain.

The Horse Thief is usually considered among prime achievements of the Fifth Generation, profiled as an artistic feature film. At the same time, it is frequently localized in the field of "ethnographic" cinema (Zhang, Xudong 1997: 249), or – to call upon Chinese terminology – the "minority film" genre.

The "minority genre" concept was introduced by Yingjin Zhang, who wanted to specify the role of "minority films" that constructed an image of marginality as opposed to the State's centralist discourse. This way, minority discourse emerged as main critical practice of the New Chinese Cinema (Zhang, Yingjin 1997: 94).

Both *On the Hunting Ground* and *The Horse Thief* seem to represent the same genre, however, while numerous authors regard former as an example of documentary convention (although without the imponderables of documentary films), *The Horse Thief* is more akin to poetic cinema and avant-garde aesthetics. We should agree with the director, who says that both, his Mongolian and Tibetan film, are unique works, unlike anything ever to be realized in China.

Zhang Rui's literary prototype tells the story of Norbu, a horse thief. While Norbu is the central character in the first part of the book, the second tells the story of his younger son, Walgon. Norbu – along with his wife and their son – is exiled by his clan from the Cherema pasture to live on a desolate Mt. Oalar, believed to be the devil's seat. Harsh existential conditions upon the mountain, hunger and cold, cause the infant to die. The main character interprets this loss as a form of retribution brought upon him by Buddha. In turn, when the second son is born, Norbu reads it as a sign of divine grace. He wants to express his gratitude through offerings, but in order to do so, he must return to stealing. When caught, he is slain. Fatherless, Walgon grows up in a farming community, already under Communist rule. He falls in love with the daughter of a former warden, who is now an outcast. He decides not to give away his friend, whom Walgon had caught on an attempted rustling, knowing that the boy only wanted to get money for his sick mother, so desperately in need of medicine. Covering for him, it is Walgon, in turn, who is put under suspicion. Wild accusations ensue from the side of the Party, revealing the secret relationship with the girl, as well as truth about his father's past. Assuming that a detected criminal cannot help but follow in his parent's footsteps, Walgon is found guilty. Trying to escape from Mt. Oalar, he is seized and thrown into jail.

Among multiple aspects of the novel, what Tian found especially interesting was not the clash between past and present, nor the system of Tibetan beliefs as opposed to Communist totalitarianism, but the story of Norbu. The film begins in 1923 and ends with Norbu's death. "The theme of the film is very simple..." – the director said – "...the relationships between humanity and religion, and between humanity and nature. [...] To me, when I was making the film, the most important question was how one faces life and death, as well as the conflict that evolves from religion. That's *Horse Thief*" (after: Kuoshu 2002: 200).

In Tian's film, we hear Buddha's name evoked multiple times, we see temples, rituals and celebrations. Nevertheless, the director refrains from giving us explanations about the meaning behind gestures. In his view, audiences ought to be content with general knowledge that what they are watching is religious in character. He does not find it necessary to explain the images he "puts on display."

In the pre-Buddhist period, Bon was the local culture and religion, whose traces – even after their transformation by Buddhism – survived to the present day. The landscape of Tibetan beliefs remains an exquisitely complex one. To a greater degree than in other territories where it had spread, Buddhism absorbed elements of the old local religion. Nowadays, Dalai Lama emerged as a supporter of the Bon tradition, recognizing in it the source of Tibetan culture and identity. After a period of persecutions, brought about by the annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China, religious life is being reborn, yet mainly in migrant communities.

Peculiarities of the plot were not the director's prime concern, as Tian would rather focus on documentary footage, presenting viewers with religious ceremonies and genre scenes shown without commentary that might have

elucidated their meaning. Dialogue, oftentimes limited to scarce phrases, fails to deliver crucial information, being strictly intradiegetic. Thus, it mainly serves as means of communication between characters in the film, even though they rarely feel the necessity to talk. The film was made in original Tibetan language. In line with an obligatory practice in Chinese film, it was later dubbed into Mandarin Chinese; dreadfully – to be honest – causing further decline in comprehensibility.

Any understanding the viewers might have inferred from the film was therefore already tainted by enigma, remaining – at best – elusive to Chinese audiences. Although it may sound paradoxical, European and American viewers proved to be much more receptive, as for them the division line between commercial and artistic film was clear-cut. Avant-garde works, as opposed to feature films or documentaries, require an altogether different attitude on the viewer's part – a strategy of reception that those audiences also found more familiar.

Already confusing was the decision to make central character a horse thief. It was intuitive for the filmmakers of the Fifth Generation, however, to assign main roles to outsiders – characters who are misunderstood, treated unfairly, rejected from communities they belong to. Still, Norbu's occupation does not necessarily make him an outright criminal. Horse theft in Tibet is a trade like any other. Geographic location, as well as the country's economic regress make horses a substitute to circulating coin. Stealing them is common practice. Nonetheless, we are not given any clear reason why had the main character chosen this particular line of career – out of fancy? Poverty? Under coercion? It becomes evident that the film's creator did not see any point in motivating characters' actions; backing them up with a cause-and-effect logic. Events take their course, they happen without an explicitly indicated reason, they appear to originate in some primordial order, obvious and intuitive to all.

To put it bluntly, *The Horse Thief* is a meditative study on life and death, society's religious customs, human beliefs and convictions of a small Tibetan society – namely, the single clan inhabiting a mountain recess.

Tian's film is interwoven with displays of rituals – scenes, which are usually more developed than others – that interchange with intimate vignettes of family life and protagonist's fate. In comparison with *On the Hunting Ground*, we will find *The Horse Thief*'s "fictional factor" more developed, whereas human drama better emphasized. Still, Norbu remains the only character resembling a typical protagonist of a fiction film. Others come into the picture as marginal figures, therefore, it would have been problematic to assign any distinctive features to them.

There are two themes that run parallelly in *The Horse Thief*. First one portrays spiritual life of a Tibetan community, and appears in five scenes in total, each constituting an autonomous unity. The second one focuses on the protagonist and his family's fate.

In interviews, Tian often repeats how the meaning of faith, of active participation in ceremonies, or a ritualization of religious rites in the life of a Tibetan

community, surpasses our imagination and sheer ability to comprehend them. This sheds some light on the dominant role played by religious rituals in his films, and why they are shown with such ineffable reverence and great expressive intensity – represented in the same way as attitudes of the main character and his family.

First Theme

The first ritual we visually partake in, without immediately recognizing what we are looking at, is the sky burial. Image of the platform upon which ceremony (*tiān zàng*) takes place, serves as film's framing device. In the beginning, we see monks on a high ground, wielding prayer wheels to summon birds; these approach in flocks, covering up a corpse, remaining invisible to our eyes, with a feathery cloud. Later on, we observe an elaborate funeral rite. The following is an account of the ceremony (1986), given by one of its eyewitnesses. It took place in the desert, on top of a rock where several meticulously dismembered bodies (engaged in this are people recruited from the marginal class *ragyaba*, as the act is associated with "impurity") were scattered over a scant territory. Birds arrive after a few minutes or so, summoned with the aid of special noise-making instruments. Over the course of an hour, entire body is devoured, bones included. Despite this spectacle's graphic nature – the onlooker notes – ceremony in itself was permeated with the sublime, giving participants a sense of deep interconnectedness with the universe and life itself (Secter 1999; Mckay 1999).

In Tian's film, the sky burial is of special importance to the plot, thus invested with a *leitmotiv* function. The village head's father's funeral, portrayed in all of its splendour, is more in line with the documentary (or rather quasi-documentary) layer of the film. Beginning, conclusion, as well as funerary locations shown in film's middle section, after the child's demise, signal a connection between the film's main theme and death.

The protagonist's life is constantly threatened in both physical and spiritual realms. To begin with, his profession cannot be counted among the safest. People protecting their belongings can kill him anytime. On one of such occasions, he is captured and beaten up, barely getting out alive. The film's final scene presents thus a likely outcome of his story, suggesting a stroke of bad luck, leading up to his death – all this inferred from a skeleton lying in the snow, even though we are unable to recognize to whom it belonged to. By banishing the entire family from Mt. Oalar, all the elders put them in danger of dying from starvation or cold. Future, after Norbu's death, would definitely look bleak. Villagers do not respect him. Elders say that even birds will not pick on his corpse, for he is deemed unworthy. Another grave statement comes from the grandmother to whom Norbu entrusts his plan of sending away his family back to the village. He tells her that his death would gain his wife and child

a chance for survival. At these words, the old woman reminds him that passing in such a way will turn him into an evil river spirit (their conversation takes place after the scapegoat drowning ceremony). What he puts at stake, then, is not just death of his physical body, but sacrificing his afterlife as well.

Festivities dedicated to the mountain ghost are yet another kind of ceremony presented throughout the narrative. Hardly a local custom, as people who attend it come from all over the region, it is held in a deep valley, which blossoms with white tents as far as the eye can see. From this we can assume that it is an annual festivity spanning over the course of a few days. Tian does not share any further insight on that. Numerous descriptions to be found in literature on the subject differ from each other, although we can recognize certain elements in the film. Due to the spectrum of variations of Tibetan Buddhism, but also tendency to cultivate local traditions, it would have been difficult to pinpoint any canonical model in operation.

Worshipping the mountain spirit is a ritual that derives from Bon religion, based upon a custom that dates back to a tradition of placing stones among other objects on mountain tops, so as to point to a place visited by the gods, whom people could enshrine here. The central element to this cult is the sacred arrow, traditionally put on roofs of palaces and subsequently on tops of regular houses.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the wind horse is one of key components of the system of four animals that demarcate cardinal directions, whereas it too stands for good fortune, lending its name to a type of prayer flag. According to Samten Gyeltsen Karmay (1998: 415), wind horses appear on prayer flags and printed paper, surrounded by four animals which are integral to the composition: garuda and a dragon in the upper corners, tiger and panther in lower ones. Its appearance brings peace, prosperity and balance. Wind horse's ritual invocation usually takes place in the morning and during waxing moon. Flags – noting on the side – are themselves called wind horses. They flutter in the wind and carry one's prayers to heaven (*Wind Horse* 2014).

The third scene concerning religious practices is presented only briefly. After their son's death, Norbu and Dolma embark on a special kind of pilgrimage, which requires one to walk a long road leading up to a magnificent temple. However, the journey has to be made not just on foot, but on one's knees, or even crawling. The pilgrimage's itinerary is shown in a series of dissolves, while distance travelled is relayed through the change of surroundings and seasons. Pilgrim destinations, connected to Buddhist practices, are quite plentiful. In the film, we get a glimpse of monks' ritual dances, the so-called Chams. They can be observed in Samye and Curpu monasteries, among other places. A presentation of multi-coloured thangkas takes place in the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery during specific holidays. In one of the shots we can even recognize an image of the four animals representing elements traditionally put on prayer flags. In the centre, there is the horse representing vital energy. Lion (in fact, a snow panther) symbolizes earth. Dragon stands for water, whereas tiger for air. Garuda (a mythical beast – either red or yellow eagle paired with a human body) – is fire.

After an abbreviated – in relation to the rest of the narrative – treatment of the pilgrimage and the temple, we are shown an extended scene of dances, beheld by main characters. For Norbu, the dance has special meaning. Both parents contemplate it thoroughly, reminiscing their child's death and their own wrongdoings. Dancers are like guardians – warriors, whose main task is to drive away ghosts and monsters, responsible for all the evil that has spread in the world. In order to symbolically protect themselves, they hide behind animal masks. The tradition of these dances stems from Bon rites. Performed at the end of winter, the dance is a celebration of spring's arrival and its victory over evil ghosts wandering the snowbound fields. Tibetan Buddhism reappropriated this tradition, while transforming dances' symbolic meaning. Daniel Kalinowski gives a description of this dance as it is performed nowadays:

Chams are performed on an occasion of the Tibetan new year, during individual protective holidays, alternatively being connected to the worship of Buddhism's historical founder (chams that recount past lives of Shakyamuni Buddha), or Tibetan Buddhism (which is a hagiographic history of the life of Padmasambhava). Dances are accompanied by singing, recitation of mantras and prayers, as well as music played on wind instruments (collapsible long trumpets, conch shell trumpets, oboes) and percussion instruments (variably sized cymbals, timpani and various types of drums). Tibetan music does not have a specifically narrative character, nor is it melodically varied. Thus, it is not performed for artistic purposes, being treated, rather, as a form of religious sacrifice. The ceremony contributes to cham's atmospheric and illustrative quality, serving as aural background to physical activity. In a rudimentary form of the cham dance, performers do not strive to attain an effect that is purely aesthetic, but one that would be overwhelmingly liturgical and devotional. (Kalinowski 2012: 181–182)

In Tian's film there is a tripartite arrangement of the spectacle's fragment. The dancers wear masks, while the group dance is held in the light of flaming torches. In the first part, masks are relatively simple, in the second, they become intricate and resemble animals, whereas in the third – we can notice their high stylization.

Religious ceremony (fourth in order) that is held in the plagued village, where herds of sheep were wiped out, is presented only in fragment. The community tries to protect themselves calling upon their gods. We can notice people wielding small prayer wheels. Simultaneously, lamas, assembled in long rows, recite prayers.

When even this fails to stop the epizootic, the *glud* rite (or “scapegoat ceremony”) is performed. This is yet another custom coming from the Bon tradition. Initially, the scapegoat was played by a man (generously rewarded, because such a mission was far from safe); later on, his part was replaced by a dough effigy (Bollywood.pun.pl 2014). The scapegoat drowning ritual is central to the film, being probably the most extensive of all religion-centred sequences.

The transference of evil powers that threaten human existence onto an animal effigy is a solemn ceremony. At the head of the procession approaching the river, walk men with guns, shooting in the air. Behind them are priests

carrying flags and musical instruments. Norbu is the one who carries the goat effigy. As they reach the river, lamas sit down in a semi-circle, along with their instruments. Music and singing have a profound role here. Norbu takes the figure to the middle of the stream, leaving it afloat there. The villagers hurl stones at the scapegoat. Norbu takes a hit, because the participants see him as an embodiment of *hegni* – an evil river ghost. He wipes blood from his forehead, takes the money left for him on the shore, and walks away.

Second Theme

Hajime Nakamura wrote that Tibetan people find self-awareness and an ability to survive as crucial features in the individual. Leading their lives in remote villages connected by narrow paths, they are aware that losing one's way may result in sure death. Tibetans are used to unbelievably harsh conditions, regularly facing lethal danger. According to the author, "[...] the Tibetan family system is regulated by customs that come from prehistoric times, which amounted to one of the most hermetic man-made institutions" (Nakamura 2005: 301).

The literature on family structures in Tibet mentions polyandry, along with its multiple variations, as the region's characteristic form of social structure until the 1950s. Most Tibetans, however, stay in monogamic relationships. "Tibetans, despite being acquainted with the concept of family, are not aware of the exceptionality of the union between a man and a woman" (Nakamura 2005: 303). Wives are treated as possessions, while marriage is a matter of establishing stable sexual bonds, not spiritual entanglement. In consequence, "Tibetans lack the concept of belonging to specifically defined social groups like family or race, submitting – rather – to religious teachings of the lamas" (Nakamura 2005: 314).

Norbu's family life relies on a strong bond between him and his son. Without doubt, his marriage is harmonious and happy (for proof, see the beautiful scene by the river), yet the couple does not manifest feelings towards each other. It seems to be submitting to rules of classical patriarchy. The protagonist acts as the head of the family. He has the final word on every issue, disclosing with his wife almost nothing about his profession, nor his plans and intentions. When the elders banish them from the village, the woman pleads they be allowed to take with them, at least, a tent. Norbu brushes her off with a brutal kick. Her beggary puts his masculine dignity at stake.

Admirable, however, is the extent of Norbu's tenderness and dedication to the child (in a scene from the beginning, after his return to the tent) – that ekes out a previously hidden trait of his personality. He does not withhold his time or attention from his son. These gestures and words of affection startle us, coming from a tough, proud and masculine male. Through a number of short scenes between Norbu and little Zhanxi, we get the picture of a man who does not leave upbringing to the mother (the child is still very young), but fulfils

this task on his own. He explains the world, along with its laws, to his son, teaching him how to care for weaker creatures.

Bathing in the holy river comes closest to the most beautiful scenes in the first part of the movie. The family spends their time on a riverbank. Such moments are peaceful, emanating with harmony and happiness. The woman washes her long hair, while Norbu looks after their son. While bathing him in the river, he expounds how magical powers of the holy water would keep him in good health and protect him from any potential threat. Father laughs, his boy as well, splashing water all around. Calm reddish landscape, the majesty of surrounding mountains and a free-flowing river correspond to the characters' light-heartedness.

Unmistakably, it is love for the boy that causes Norbu's downfall. Feeling obliged to present the child with a special gift, he steals a precious medallion from the temple. After returning home, he hangs it around the boy's neck. Deeds like this are considered sacrilegious. This is a crime which the community punishes severely. As a consequence, entire family is exiled. This episode sees Norbu fighting desperately to provide for his family, but first of all, to protect the child. Alas, it is unable to bear the arduous conditions of their new existence, and falls ill. For our protagonist, the last resort is to turn to religious practices, entrusting in their redemptive powers. No matter how hard he prays, bringing the boy holy water collected at the temple, the child cannot be saved. In one of the scenes, he cuddles, cradles, sings a lullaby to the sick child, showing him an infinitude of fondness. It is only in the scenes with Zhanxi that we witness the extent of Norbu's emotions. When he is alone, or accompanied only by his wife, his expression remains impenetrable. It reveals nothing. In a snowed in landscape, with a dead son in his arms, his face is empty. Everything he must be going through is veiled in silence.

In similar circumstances, nearly without uttering a word, he receives news as fortunate as they are surprising. When Dolma tells him that she is expecting a baby, the man will not even make a slightest gesture towards her. Showing no trace of emotion, he leans on a column.

The moment his second son is born, Norbu begins to act with full determination, aware that this child too would not survive their stay at Mt. Oalar. The only choice he has left is to abandon his wife, for only then would they be able to go back to the village. Nothing else matters – his son must survive, whatever the cost.

The sending-off scene is particularly eloquent. Norbu asks his wife to take the child out of the sheets and direct her entire attention to it, bidding them farewell with cordial gestures. To his wife, he spares not a second, leaving without a kiss, or a hug. He simply mounts the horse and rides away.

On their own, the scenes depicting Norbu's family life could be arranged into a coherent storyline. However, such vignettes are quite short, alternating with scenes of greater complexity, more spectacular ones, in a way, imbued with semantic gravity. This does not just involve ceremonial scenes, but also

those that take place in the village infested by plague, or the exodus scene, in which the inhabitants leave their territories *en masse*.

Completely justifiable would be to single out scenes that reflect a third theme, which feature exteriors and open air sceneries. Like with Mongolian steppes before, the director felt entranced by austere Tibetan landscapes. As an author, Tian has a great sense of pictoriality, matched only by his conviction about the possibility of expressing every kind of experience through visual means. Focusing on the picture, as is evidenced here, relegates any ambiguities in the sphere of represented objects to the background. Oftentimes, we do not immediately recognize what we are looking at, nonetheless, we find ourselves taken in by the beauty of it. For example, in the scene set in front of a temple, we behold the *thangka* – large embroidery on cloth – initially veiled by gauze. Mesmerized, we simply behold the vaguely comprehended spectacle.

Tian does not refrain from using long, static takes, indispensable for conveying depth of experience. Unfolding landscapes before our eyes, as if they were Chinese scroll paintings. The director communicates the immensity of Tibetan steppes, which in themselves neglect human scale, reducing human figures to mere staffage. This also pertains to the horizon line, which frames the sky in such a way that it is usually locked in between two rocks, reaffirming man's relationship with stone, the barren land, and sheer vastness of snow-covered plains. Tian shot his film in Tibet – more accurately, in provinces of Gansu and Qinghai, casting mostly people living in the region, beside professional actors.

Conclusion

The Horse Thief amounts to an intense experience of otherness; so strong that audiences nearly feel excluded from the spectacle, whose meaning constantly eludes them. It fails to meet the viewers' expectations about typical "exotic" cinema, which presents this otherness tamed, instead of serving it to them *in crudo*.

Tian says that his films are made with 21st century audiences in mind. What better time than now? For whom if not for us? The director is convinced that photographing reality should be enough of a medium capable of revealing secrets of this represented world. In terms of his artistic strategy, he is far from making precocious judgements, bluntly proving a thesis, or manifesting his artistic self. In his films, we encounter a kind of humility in approaching the world from his representational vantage point, supported with a non-arbitrary perspective that upholds his confidence in opening up the film to emotional reception and participation on the part of the viewer.

Translated by Maciej Stasiowski

Bibliography

- Kalinowski, Daniel. 2012. Tybetański taniec czam. Perspektywa odbioru i kwestia widowiskowości. *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, 2, pp. 181–194.
- Karmay, Samten G. 1998. *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Katmandu: Mandala Publishing.
- Kuoshu, Harry H. 2002. *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Nakamura, Hajime. 2005. *Systemy myślenia ludów Wschodu. Indie, Chiny, Tybet, Japonia*. Transl. Maciej Kanert and Wiesława Szkudlarczyk-Brkić. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Zhang, Xudong. 1997. *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*. Durham and Londyn: Duke University Press.
- Zhang, Yingjin. 1997. From “Minority Film” to “Minority Discourse”: Questions of Nationalhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Cinema. In: Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng (ed.). *Transnational Chinese Cinemas. Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 81–104.

Internet sources

- Bollywood.pun.pl. 2014. *Scapegoat Ceremony*. [Online]. [bollywood.pun.pl](http://www.bollywood.pun.pl/viewprintable.php?id=3866). Accessed from: <http://www.bollywood.pun.pl/viewprintable.php?id=3866> [1.12.2014].
- Mckay, Alex. 1999. *Tibetan Buddhist “Sky Burial.”* [Online]. Accessed from: <https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln260/skyburial.htm> [16.11.2014].
- Sector, Mondo. 1999. *Tibetan Buddhist “Sky Burial.”* [Online]. Accessed from: <https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln260/skyburial.htm> [16.11.2014].
- Wind Horse. 2014. [Online]. Accessed from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wind_horse [30.11.2014].

Filmography

- Delamu (Chá mǎ gǔdō: Dé lǎ mǔ, 2004)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- Lady of the Dynasty (Wángcháo de Nǚrén Yáng Guǎfēi, 2015)*, by Zhang Yimou, Cheng Shiqing, and Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- Li Lianying: The Imperial Eunuch (Dǐ Trǐjiān Lǐ Liányīng, 1991)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- On the Hunting Ground (Liǎchǎng zhā sā, 1985)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- Springtime in the Small Town (Xiǎochéng zhī chūn, 2002)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- The Blue Kite (Lán fēngzhēng, 1993)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- The Go Master (Wú Qīngyuán, 2006)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- The Horse Thief (Dǎo mǎ zéi, 1986)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- The Street Players (Gǔ shū yérén, 1987)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
- The Warrior and the Wolf (Láng Zāi Jē, 2009)*, by Tian Zhuangzhuang.

Summary

There are three goals set before this article, elucidating on the profile of Tian Zhuangzhuang, a Chinese film director from the so-called Fifth Generation, comprising directors, who studied at the Beijing Film Academy between 1978 and 1982. In the first place, it brings to the fore a lesser known creator, while reviewing his *oeuvre* through the “ethnographic” aspect of both the *minority film* genre, as well as his semi-documentary style of filmmaking. Secondly, the major part of the text is an analysis of one of his most important works, namely, *The Horse Thief* (1986), touching upon multiple aspects of plot, pictoriality, and religion presented in the film. As it has been noted by the critics, *The Horse Thief* amounts to an intense experience of Otherness, upsetting audiences expecting cinematic “exoticism,” which presents alienness as already tamed. Instead, Zhuangzhuang’s film serves it to them *in crudo*. The final aspect concerns Tibetan culture, religious beliefs, traditions and customs portrayed at length in their “raw” form,

without any commentary, as in observational cinema. This way, *The Horse Thief* can be seen as representative of the director's approach, who takes on the role of a discoverer, or voyager, who surveys a *terra incognita* with an unprejudiced eye, while refusing to fall back upon a pre-established system of beliefs. His is a cinema of sensations that precedes rational thought and judgement.

Tian Zhuangzhuang. Autor nawiedzony przez obrazy

Streszczenie

Niniejszemu artykułowi – poświęconemu sylwetce Tiana Zhuangzhuanga, reżysera Piątej Generacji (w poczet której zaliczani są byli studenci Pekinńskiej Szkoły Filmowej z lat 1978–1982) – przyświecały trzy założenia. W pierwszej kolejności, koncentrując się na twórcy mniej znanym, autorka naświetla jego dorobek poprzez uwypuklenie etnograficznego charakteru gatunku *minority film*, a także paradokmentalnych rysów własnych dzieł reżysera. Drugim poziomem, stanowiącym zasadniczą część tekstu, jest wielopoziomowa analiza jednego z najważniejszych dzieł Tiana – *Złodzieja koni* (1986). Jak zauważyli krytycy, seans *Złodzieja koni* stawia przed widzem problem Inności w sposób nieoswojony przez konwencje kina egzotycznego. Ostatni aspekt, na którym zasadza się artykuł, związany jest z kulturą Tybetu – systemem wierzeń, tradycją, zwyczajami. Twórca poświęca im dużo miejsca, prezentując je bez jakiegokolwiek komentarza pozwalającego na zrozumienie ich sensu. Z tej właśnie przyczyny *Złodziej koni* jest filmem znamienym dla twórczości Tiana, gdyż reprezentuje filozofię twórczą reżysera, wcielającego się w rolę odkrywcy czy podróżnika spoglądającego na ziemię nieznaną bez uprzedzeń. Kino Tiana Zhuangzhuanga to kino zmysłów poprzedzających racjonalny osąd.

