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Prayer Wheels for the Other: *Haunted by the Images: the film works of Tian Zhuangzhuang* book review

There is a sequence in *The Horse Thief* (1986), in which an elderly Buddhist monk spins his prayer wheel, sitting in close proximity to a flock of Himalayan vultures feasting on a corpse. Seen separate at first, in the next shot both of these activities are filmed together. On the Tibetan plateau, balance is maintained – there is place for religious practice and for ravenous devouring. As another shot supersedes the scene, we take on Norbu's perspective. Whether he beholds the spectacle from a distance is debatable. Is he really witnessing the non-event described above, or is he just blankly staring at the horizon, as he does so often? The director intends to keep his audience guessing, beguiling them into arranging images into a coherent narrative on their own and draw their own conclusions.

Tian Zhuangzhuang's cinema inhabits a niche that has been quite difficult to share with him. For all the facts, contexts, even story developments he decides to leave out, it offers sublime beauty that had drawn the attention of audiences worldwide, despite undergoing incredible hardships in the process of reaching them. *The Blue Kite* (1993), smuggled to Cannes, earned him not only a Grand Prix at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1993, but a ten-year ban on making films. Nonetheless, *in toto*, his filmography – oscillating between arthouse “chamber pieces” and purely commercial ventures – remains confusing for critics and audiences alike, ever since his first “proper” films, from the robustly idiosyncratic *On the Hunting Ground* (1984), to his latest brash with heroic fantasy genre in *The Warrior and the Wolf* (2009). Thus, the director's output puts a difficult task in front of the prospected spectator, although in no way does it match the challenge set before an academic scholar who intends to locate the entry point to his *œuvre*. Assuredly, Alicja Helman's *Haunted by the Images: the film works of Tian Zhuangzhuang* (2016) not only sheds light on the Fifth Generation's most enigmatic representative, but – alongside her past excursions into Chinese cinematography, *Shades of Red* (2010) on Zhang Yimou and *Paths of Lost Time* (2012) on Chen Kaige –

does so with a flare that instantly turns the book into a primer of aesthetics and filmmaking language. The language, which even the Han majority of Chinese viewers found incomprehensible.

Fifth Generation directors – the first class admitted to the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution – moved away from portrayals in which the rise of People's Republic of China brings about liberation and prosperity to various ethnic minorities living within its bounds, toward an appreciation of their diverse cultures. In equal measure it was a struggle for linguistic innovation and unprecedented visual style. “Like their predecessors, the fifth generation favored a non-dramatic structure and depoliticized narration, but they went farther with scant dialogue and music as well as abundant ambiguities in characterization and narration.”¹ Such shifts were connected to the post-Maoist revisionism, while also emerging as a critical reaction to past decades’ overtly ideological and literary plots. However, as Helman notes, even against this background Zhuangzhuang’s cinematic project remains slightly removed from his contemporaries’ pursuits, intending to capture modernity’s spirit. Instead, his films are permeated with a sense of timelessness.

This may sound somewhat paradoxical, given the fact that both his early features *On the Hunting Ground* and *The Horse Thief* take place in almost archetypal settings, whose historicity came from censors’ interventions (the date 1923, which we see in *The Horse Thief*’s opening credits, was meant to explain Tibet’s rural look as not yet “peacefully liberated” from its primitive condition by People's Liberation Army in 1950), rather than stemming from events represented on screen. *Haunted by the Images* places emphasis on is the fact that while the director’s approach to historical cinema and, by default, to *minority genre* (or “minority discourse”,² as Yingjin Zhang termed this tendency) remains quite lush, his films don’t subscribe to an exoticism of his colleagues and forefathers from the Fourth Generation. Tian’s cinema sidesteps even this category. Engulfed by his films, we are likely to be drawn into rituals, practices, customs, which are shown in great detail, yet being given no extended explanation or commentary to actual meanings behind them. Hence, the Mongolian language in *On the Hunting Ground* wasn’t even dubbed for the cinemas. It is the spectator who remains a foreigner and needs to “grasp this difficulty”. Unsurprisingly, alienation reverberated also in these films’ revenues – *The Horse Thief* sold in 7 copies in comparison to the standard of 100 copies. Nevertheless, a modest success, as for his previous effort was distributed in two.

¹ Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, (New York and London: Routledge) (2004), p. 236.

² Harry H. Kuoshu, “Cinema Exotica: Ethnic Minorities as the PRC's "Internal Other"”, in *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society*, ed. Harry H. Kuoshu (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. 169.

While admitting to Zhuangzhuang's strategic "indigestibility", Helman's third detour into landscapes left by the Fifth Generation creators serves as much more than a simple biographic insight into successive, though not always successful moviemaking efforts of the Beijing native. It is a comprehensive cross-examination of films and aspects of culture, history, religion, and philosophy that silently underlie these productions. Moreover, this meticulous study has been executed without disregarding entries that don't necessarily reflect Zhuangzhuang's artistic niche carved out for him by Western film critics.

Unlike his filmography, the resultant portrait is diversified, yet not shambolic. "Tian...", Helman writes, "...was the most radical [in the Fifth Generation's] attempt at transforming the appearance of Chinese cinema. Other than his colleagues, who prolifically engaged the experiences of theory and tradition of Western film thought, [Zhuangzhuang] tried to invent everything anew, guided by his researcher and discoverer's zeal."³ This "Otherness" – located, at times, geographically (Mongolia [*On the Hunting Ground*], Tibet [*The Horse Thief*], Japan [*The Go Master*]), otherwise, on the basis of social strata (*Street Players*, *Rock 'n' Roll Kids*, *Li Lianying: The Imperial Eunuch*) – found in Tian's treatment of his characters and the communities they belong to and are rejected by, become the focal point of Helman's traverse.

What discerns his most personal projects (here, among films that comprise this category, are: *On the Hunting Ground*, *The Horse Thief*, *The Blue Kite*, *Springtime in a Small Town*, *Delamu*, *The Go Master*), is the way in which he "...position[s] himself in the role of the discoverer, a traveller looking at the strange land with his unprejudiced eye, without referring to the accepted system of beliefs, [...] without constraining himself to the limits of a particular genre, or his audience's expectations."⁴ Adding, further on, that the practice most "...characteristic of him is the accentuation of documentary factors, non-conclusive nature of the plots, narrative composition that resembles a suite of images."⁵ This probably came as the greatest obstacle in truly appreciating Zhuangzhuang's works, as the audiences – just as much as critics themselves – complained about the lack of classical storytelling. This way, Tian's intrinsically personal creations are like poetic ethnographic studies informed by (but not entirely congruent with) an outsider's perspective, while history rushes in as "borrowed scenery".

Aside from the insightful analyses and historical contextualization that define *Haunted by the Images*, the feature that gives off a nuanced flavour to Helman's 200-

³ Alicja Helman, *Nawiedzony przez obrazy: Twórczość filmowa Tiana Zhuangzhuanga*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego) (2016), p. 4.

⁴ Alicja Helman, p. 199.

⁵ Alicja Helman, p. 201.

page study is the amount of space devoted to expounding the aesthetics of the Far-Eastern cultural sphere. Such moments, far from rare, are especially enriching when the author links specific traits in Zhuangzhuang's style to distinctly oriental aesthetic philosophies of *xuǎn xiǎng* (suspended thought), or a unifying purpose of communicating a spiritual, highly subjective reading of reality (*qì yù*), which is in stark contrast to Plato's concept of mimesis that underlies Western thought. In this light, what might appear as narrative ellipsis is revealed as compositional strategy employed to subjugate screened images to a "continuous flow of emotions" of the film's protagonist. This confirms Yuwen's (*Springtime in a Small Town*) temporal back and forth account, that blends retrospections, futuroscpections, as well as events that unfold in the present. In the same manner it allows the viewer to share Norbu's (*The Horse Thief*) outcast perspective of misfortunes leading up to his death. This way, the author also explains how experiential and painterly – rather than ones belonging to the realm of literature – Zhuangzhuang's films are, providing a narrative that perfectly reflects not merely the protagonists' point of view, as, e. g., could be inferred from the fragmentary character of Tietou's childhood memories refracting historical events of the Great Leap Forward in *The Blue Kite* (1993). Moreover, what is suggested in *Haunted by...* is the presence of a subjective "institution" proposed by Albert Laffey, namely that of *le grand imagier* (master of images), responsible for the dynamics of spectatorial immersion into Zhuangzhuang's outsider habitats. In this respect, Helman traces Tian's ethnographic "igneous intrusions" in the documentary traditions of Alberto Cavalcanti and Jean Rouch.

Traditionally articulated when representations of minority groups are involved, the theme of exclusion – in Zhuangzhuang's films – migrates into cinematographic and editing techniques and strategies, of which the author takes note in regards to the 1986 cult film. "The Horse Thief gives a viscerally strong sense of Otherness, so strong that the audience feels nearly excluded from the spectacle whose meaning constantly eludes them. In total, it doesn't succumb to expectations that the viewers hold toward "exotic" cinematographies, mainly presenting the oddness already tamed, rather than serving it to them *in crudo*."⁶

As previously stated, imitating Zhuangzhuang's compositional strategy was obviously not the encompassing aim on author's behalf. Logical chapter structure combined with a well-paced itinerary of the inquiry should appeal in equal measures to Chinese Cinema buffs and newcomers alike. Film critics and occidental enthusiasts may find themselves aligned in a queue to the nearest bookstore or generating web traffic on websites listed in the book's references list. Tian Zhuangzhuang used to defend himself from harsh criticism saying that his kind of

⁶ Alicja Helman, p. 54.

cinema evidently lies in wait for a 21st century audience. *Haunted by the Images* would convince him that the wait is over.

Alicja Helman, *Nawiedzony przez obrazy: Twórczość filmowa Tiana Zhuangzhuanga*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego) (2016), 268 p.

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