

The past in the way of the present : Ruminations on Pema Tseden's movie *Old Dog*

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- 1 Life is an ordeal in societies where the smooth unfolding of spontaneous expressions is obstructed by social, religious, or political impositions. When movies are not shot for the sake of sheer entertainment but want to communicate aspects of the reality in which their creators operate, the cinema of societies threatened by these evils offers food for thought hardly like any other. This is perhaps why Third World cinema has a heroic touch that is lacking in the productions from bourgeois Western societies.
- 2 Having read what people and critics had to say about it, I always wished to see Pema Tseden's "Khyi rgan" (*Old Dog*). Pema Tseden is the first Tibetan movie-maker living in China. For one reason or another, this was never happening but finally it did. My ruminations about the movie are late incoming and so I begin with apologies to anyone who dares wasting time to read these lines. It seems I was the last man standing in queue to view *Old Dog*. My long expectation was worthy of the days, weeks and years I spent wondering whether I could see it. I'm normally quite difficult, for I always go for the maximum (that much ? I ask myself. Am I sure ?) In its case I'm all praises. This movie is the best production ever on Tibet — or on Tibet by a Tibetan and an Inji alike — I have seen, although I did not watch everything on Tibet that has been shown on the silver screen.
- 3 ~ *The director surely has command of the filmic language.* He knows how to narrate a story and to visualise it. His talent helps the simplicity of the story to stand up in all its beauty and communicates with a strength met with in a cinematic season that is long gone but that was one of the greatest moments of the medium. I mean to refer to Italian Neo-Realism, where one encounters a powerful mix of filmic narrative skills combined with stories that are deeply true. The tragedy of Tibet has never been depicted in such stunning terms as in *Old Dog*, for Tibetan cinema — whether by Tibetans or Injis — has

been until now somewhat stereotyped by an effort to interpret the subjects chosen. Tibetan film-making is in its infancy, like many other disciplines people from the plateau have just began to expose themselves to. *Old Dog* does not aim at illustrating a theme or give an insight into the Tibetan way of life and its people, unlike anthropological movies – the obligatory genre when dealing with anything concerning the plateau. The decision to tell the story that *Old Dog* tells makes the difference. The movie breaks the deadlock of filmic works based on the anthropological approach. It is anthropological on many counts, but it is more than that. It is a fiction movie with a poignant theme and deep multiple messages. In *Old Dog* Pema Tseden has the great merit to tell a story for what it is, without explanations or an erudite approach. It is a story that comes out on screen with a low pace. As in some movies of another cinematic genre — Spaghetti Westerns — a slow flow helps to build up the climax. Movies transcend to another dimension when they have a good ending. Pema Tseden indeed knows how to handle the dramatic end of his story, a metaphor of Tibetan life on the plateau under the Chinese. The Chinese are never mentioned, but their presence is thick on screen.

- 4 ~ *Old Dog* by Pema Tseden tells the story of an old nomad who gets back his mastiff, the guard of his cattle for many years, from the Chinese to whom his own son had sold the animal. The son sells it because he has realised that it is preferable to give away the animal than to have it stolen from people involved in the trade of mastiffs to satisfy the demand of affluent Chinese who have recently developed a fancy for these animals. The old nomad gets on his horse and goes downtown to return money to the Chinese dog-merchant and get his companion back. This is the beginning of a number of attempts by middle-men involved in the trade to deprive the old nomad of his sheep guard, lured by the high prices these dogs are fetching with the Chinese. Life becomes a sort of nightmare for the old man who finds himself sieged by the greed of those people. He eventually resorts to the extreme act of killing his own dog rather than to seeing him snatched away by the thieves.
- 5 ~ *Parallel narratives*. There are several narratives that run parallel to the main theme of the old man and his dog. They mainly concern the old man's son. That is just natural, for the son is the major personage after the father and his dog. He is the first to sell the dog out, but realises that he had made a mistake soon after, when he witnesses the reaction of his father. His is a story of catharsis to the point that he beats up and sends to hospital the Chinese dog-merchant who had tried to steal the dog after returning him to the father. The son is portrayed as a confused youth, torn between the beauty of pastoralist life, which he reckons as genuine and the leisure of modern existence, being prone to drinking. There is something that unites the old and the young in the family. That is television, which exercises an irresistible spell on both of them.
- 6 More unachieved, in my view, is the depiction of another parallel theme. This is the father's obsession that his son, who does not hesitate to define as useless on every possible occasion, has not yet had a child from his wife. The son, being modern, does not feel any desire to have a child, while the father is outraged that he is not caring for the continuation of the family. Eventually, the father obliges the son to go to hospital and have a medical check, which the son feels shameful to have. He obliges his wife to undertake it and comes to know that he himself, not his wife, is barren. He feels hurt in his pride, torn between an old-style ego, upset by a failure that a man should never show, and proclivity to avoid responsibility in life. The theme is a bit forced into the account

and is treated rather superficially just as another contradiction between traditional and modern life.

- 7 ~ *The movie is a case of cultural euthanasia.* Faced with the middle men's perpetual attempts at stealing his animal or buying him out that are upsetting his lifestyle, killing his dog of thirteen years is the only rational choice left to the old man. The audience gasped in horror and shock in the movie hall, during the projection of *Old Dog* at a Tibetan film festival, when the old man suddenly strangles the dog with his chain. I was not taken by awe and surprise. I had expected something similar happening in the movie. It was a bit of time that I was mumbling within myself that the wayout of the impasse had to be drastic — dramatic perhaps — to counteract the continuous risk of loosing the old man's companion. He decided to lose it, and to let no one else at his place decide that he had to lose it.
- 8 ~ *The moral of the story is that one should "act like a karma yogin".* Once cornered in a situation he does not want and cannot escape, the old man resorts to keep destiny in his own hands rather than let it slip out of his control.
- 9 ~ *It is a story of renouncement.* The old man chooses renouncement as a way to be free from the shackles of a world he does not belong to. It is a message that sacrificing something one cares for (his companion for thirteen years) is a way to go on, and this is what he does after killing his dog. He crosses an empty field into the future — the unknown — with the confidence that he is still himself, strong of his attitude, and that he has not sold out to the values that are not his own. His world is in shatters but, despite all that is going wrong, this world is still intact deep inside him.
- 10 ~ *In many ways, the Chinese arrogate decisions to themselves* without leaving any prospects to the Tibetans. Self immolation and the euthanasia of the dog are cases whereby Tibetans keep decisions in their hands. The many cases of self sacrifice leave the Chinese unprepared despite their might, the death of the dog leaves audiences unprepared. Once again Tibetans are able at least to unsettle the policies of the Chinese and the imagination of the audiences around the world. I still wonder whether anyone can explain the Tibetan psyche. This has not happened yet.
- 11 ~ *The film ends on a positive note.* A renouncement leads to a new beginning. It is not the son but the old man who walks on across an empty field at the end of the movie after killing his dog. His journey in life is not over.
- 12 ~ *The future is assigned to the old man rather than his son.* This is another message ; it tells that the Tibetan past is the key to the future.
- 13 ~ *Tibet is not for sale.* Unlike what is happening in most countries in this age of widespread, rampant search for material gain, including the Third World, Buddhist ethics being deeply rooted among most people of Tibet, especially — I would dare to say — among the commoners, aspiration for money and a wealthy lifestyle is not the priority. Money — in particular Chinese money to which Tibetans are perforce exposed — cannot buy Tibetan soul. *Old Dog* tells that there are enough Tibetans who go anyway for money and easy-earned profit, even implying that this could be the way ahead in the future, but it also tells us that anyone who treasures the values proper to the people of the plateau and their belief system walks in the opposite direction. They are on a path on which money is not everything and several other values come much before it. Economics versus ethics is one more battle of spirits on the plateau. It can be once again the old versus the new, but with a distinction. The rather detached attitude of commoners in Tibetan society may

also rest on a vision that has brought the Chinese to eradicate feudalism in Tibet, where the high ranks in the monastic hierarchy have, throughout the century, shown a good amount of attachment to a prosperous and comfortable life. The commoners, who historically had none of that, seem to me to be no less spiritual than a good number of spiritual masters. That the Chinese cannot buy Tibetan soul with their renmimbi (yuan) spells good for the future. Improved life conditions (“panem et circenses”), although appealing to almost everyone, are not a guarantee for the Chinese to win over a populace who relates to them with utter defiance. I wonder how effective will the reward be, recently promised by the Chinese to anyone who provides information on plans to self immolation. I can imagine that the Chinese will gain little ground with these methods.

- 14 ~ *It is a story told by means of animals as well.* The director seems to have a fair idea of animal husbandry. The little gimmick of the isolated sheep, who had stranded away from the herd, struggling to reunite with the others, but is obstructed by a fence, is a pearl of sheep psychology. Indeed fences have been made to divide the plots of the nomads. The fence and the sheep are symbols of the divisive policy adopted by the Chinese in land allocation. In the bygone days the land was never divided, least to say fenced, and the introduction of fences has germinated into land disputes among Tibetans. Litigiousity in the communities does not serve the purpose of Tibetan identity and does not spell good for the struggle to achieve a better — *i.e.* independent — future.
- 15 The episode is also a symbol of the Tibetan struggle in isolation, a metaphor of the ideological, economical and humanitarian barrier the Chinese have been building around the plateau. The sheep, isolated by the rest of the herd by a fence, but striving hard to rejoin it by trying every single possible passage across the wires and eventually succeeding in finding one big enough to go through it, is a parable for Tibetan resilience that will be eventually rewarded with freedom.
- 16 ~ *The stillness of time.* I have heard complaints that the movie is slow. Those, who say so, have probably not experienced the way time flows on the Tibetan plateau, away from the towns transformed into Chinese steel and mirror monsters. Time seems to be immemorial on the sandy plains and the hills lit by the sun. Life flows with a rhythm that has its own pace and everyone — men, animals, even fierce winds — seem to be aware of that. The slowness of the alternation from days to nights is transferred to and tangibly existing in the villages which have retained very little Tibetanhood except a mockery of traditional architecture without any sensibility. Time there, too, flows slow like the mythical water courses of the Indo-Tibetan tradition and unlike the rivers that cross the plateau opening their way fiercely through deserts, rocks and grass lands.
- 17 ~ *The horror of Chinese insertion into the Tibetan landscape.* The Chinese have reduced all villages of Tibet to ugly anonymity. The Amdo village, stage of several sequences of *Old Dog*, does not escape this ubiquitous and insensitive approach. It could be any village anywhere in Eastern Tibet. The houses are sinister representatives of a mockery of the old Tibetan architectural tradition. A dusty snooker table stands crippled in the middle of the main road, the one road of the village. Miserable small Chinese-style shops packed with cheap, basic goods are run by absent people sitting in them — or outside — with no expressions on their faces. Everywhere is mud, spilled machine oil, noisy and pollutant tractors struggling on the way. Poverty is enhanced by the brutality of the local conditions, an environment of degradation. Pema Tseden sends this other message. This is the hopelessness of the myriad villages of Tibet and their lost identity and personality. This desolation documents well the Chinese insertion into the Tibetan landscape. In one

sense what Pema Tseden shows is meaningful. It proves the extraneity and absurdity of this occupation. Ecological damage is massive on its micro scale besides the damage created by great Chinese enterprises, like mining and deforestation. Even the weather is gloomy in Pema Tseden's village, while the sun shines on the pastures where the cattle of the old man graze.

- 18 ~ *The absence of a trace of religion*. Liberating. In the movie religion does not represent and guarantee the spontaneous unfolding of Tibetan culture exclusively. Other aspects of Tibetan culture are no less indispensable to the survival of its civilisation. Despite the idea common in occupied Tibet that religion is the lever to freedom, local cultures and traditions are signs of freedom and well being, opposite to the oppression of modernity and arrogance.
- 19 ~ *The dogs in the movie*. The mastiffs I have seen in Tibet are much wilder than the dogs of the movie. Forget the old dog, but the other, too, look like mascots rolling at the pace of the leash and battered motorbikes that the actors ride in the movie. The mastiffs I have seen fly like arrows across the plains where nomads pitch their black tents.
- 20 ~ *Politics sometimes jeopardise creativity*. Nothing against politics — there is much need of it — but the ideological deadlock in the diaspora is so prominent that sclerotises everything, including Tibetan creativity. In its apparently non political approach, a movie from Tibet like *Old Dog* is subtly and powerfully political. It puts forward a fundamental political message besides showing the horrors of Chinese occupation in daily life and does it in a way that is poignantly poetical. Paradoxically a movie director is freer in occupied Tibet, if he resorts to use his creativity, than in exile, where there is an ideological correctness that needs to be addressed by means of standards concerning religion, politics or the social.
- 21 ~ *It is a parable of the arrogance and stupidity of a world of empty values* — the fancy for Tibetan mastiffs recently spreading among affluent urban Chinese — in opposition to a world with deep and archaic customs shattered by greed and opportunism.
- 22 ~ *Old Dog is humanistic cinema*. It breathes new air in the infancy of Tibetan cinema, for it does not want to show, represent something to the audience, but goes straight into the depth of the Tibetan psyche and transmits to the viewer the sense of anguish that is individual and, for this reason, dramatically collective.
- 23 The movie is humanistic in that it documents and puts forward a description of how changes in culture affect people. It is a movie on change. This obviously happens either in a positive or negative sense. When it comes to Tibet, change is topically negative and misplaces people's existences on account of the repression that the Chinese exercise upon every aspect of the traditional way of life. Change is not for the better for the greatest majority of people in Tibet. The old customs have forged the Tibet that the Chinese have wiped out. Change is the policy of the occupants. The Tibetans who buy and steal mastiffs are portrayed as people taking this opportunity for personal financial gain. The movie does not go further to examine the motivations that lead these people to work for the new lucrative trade. The motivation they adduce for buying and stealing dogs is sheer profit. Profit-making is read without any support or justification from the part of the director, whereas Pema Tseden follows the old man's struggle to save what is dear to him with empathy.

- 24 ~ *It is contemporary*, for the movie is built around a theme that is nothing else than a new vogue spread over the plateau ; a vogue that, once again, breaks away from spontaneous cultural expressions. Mastiffs are not pet dogs.
- 25 ~ *In several cases the movie shows Tibetans living a life of cynicism*. Life is somewhat accepted by a number of locals for what it is now and for what the Chinese offer. There is a perceived dichotomy between the people hanging around the village and those in nomadic settlements, but life flows equally repetitive in the village and on the nomadic pastures with a stillness that Chinese occupation has not overturned. This theme is the subtle link, the meeting point between past and modernity in the huge expanse of the plateau outside the major inhabited centres.
- 26 The movie does not say whether the few people shown in the village, either playing endless snooker games or sitting in small shops packed with goods — Chinese style — are ex-nomads obliged to live a village life by the economic conditions created by the foreign occupants. They are depicted as living an indolent life, while the author sees nomads' life as a full yet simple but ultimately rewarding life. These nomads — turned urban people — may not have faced the ugly destiny of others obliged to transfer themselves inside the compounds built by the Chinese, which resemble prison camps rather more than spontaneous settlements. Even in Pema Tseden's village people move around like puppets in search of a stage.
- 27 ~ *In its powerfully striking simplicity, the movie sends out a bold message to the Chinese*. The movie's message is much bolder than most overtly politically-oriented documentaries dealing with Tibetan affairs I know of. Its subtle treatment and the screenplay apparently dealing with a subject that is not blatantly political may have helped to its screening — though moderate — outside China in movie festivals around the world without too much hindrance. But I wonder whether everything that is shown and told in the movie has gone down well with the authorities that oversee the messages sent out by works of art. Or whether something has been removed. It seemingly did not suffer censorship. Is this a sign of an opening in Chinese ideological inflexibility ? That would be really good. Or is it critical blindness ?
- 28 ~ *The message the movie sends out to the Chinese* is that integration is next to nihil after more than half a century of their presence in Tibet and that their inflexibility creates conditions that the ordinary Tibetans find difficult to stomach. The old man walking into the unknown at the end is the metaphor of things to come. It says that the future of Tibet is undecipherable although somewhat traced by Chinese repression but Tibetans will keep on counting on an inner strength that their world nowhere stops from infusing into them despite persecution.
- 29 ~ *In a way the movie should be an eye opener for the Chinese*. It somewhat offers solutions without hinting at them, not even slightly. It tells that things do not work in the way that has been sanctioned by them until now. It says that time has come for a change to the changes in the lifestyle brought by the Chinese in successive waves. But the Chinese may not listen : there is no worse deaf man than the one who does not want to hear.

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