

Elucidation from the Inside and Outside: An Analysis of the Tibetan Film *Balloon*

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(Trans. from Tibetan by Kalsang Tashi) ⁹⁶

Abstract: Writing in poetic prose, Datsang Palkhar Gyal offers to readers the deep layers of meanings in Pema Tseden's film *Balloon*, reflecting on the philosophical and at the same time political issues of existence and transition. He reads the overarching theme of change in *Balloon* vis-à-vis women, time, species, and films.

Keywords: Balloon, change, women, reproduction, time, species, films

By virtue of introducing a range of perspectives and reflections on various topics, the film *Balloon* concentrates on contradictory views between the current situation of human reproduction and local cultures, thus teeming with multiple interpretations about irreversible changes in the present times. The director Pema Tseden, holding the thread of a balloon, counts white and black pebbles of reproduction in the world and birth control.

⁹⁶ The essay was translated from Tibetan by Kalsang Tashi and revised by Françoise Robin.

Indeed, lumping together human life and destiny, human dreams and reality, human opinions and existence, human future and choices, Pema Tseden elaborates a visual story in which all are represented directly and indirectly through a balloon. The balloon, the vital force that shapes the plot of the film, is best described as “the unbearable lightness of being,”⁹⁷ while being heavy for anyone to carry.

If we put specific scenes of the film into words, we can say that they represent the choice between the advantages of religious belief pitted against the disadvantages of samsara; they are like a wheel of contradictions between various interpretations, a tragic scene of the interplay between inner consciousness and outside reality. The ‘balloon’ is the obstacle to life, but it is also what adds pleasure to life. The unfolding garland of lives is both a gateway to transmission and an extra pressure in new modes of life.

In the film, thousands of hopes, each with their own hues, weigh down on a single life and also produce countless sighs. The opinions of the nun, the authoritarian attitude of the doctor, the entrusting hope of Dhargye, the father, and the weariness of Dolkar, the mother are like fierce wind and air breathed into the balloon, producing a plot of love and hate.

Changes and Women

In the history of Tibetan cinema, *Balloon* is the first Tibetan film

⁹⁷ The author alludes to Milan Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

that tackles the theme of the situation of Tibetan women. Its director endorses the viewpoint of women and drawing from his recollections of women's lives and realities, mixes them into the shifting body of women in the 1990s. In between the truth of material life and inner life, the camera shows and evaluates women's fate, women's tears, women's status, and social expectations about women. [...] ⁹⁸ The colour of 'Balloon' signals that the camera enters the colour of life, but actually, making the condom appear as a balloon is a hint either to freedom of giving life or to restrictions to giving life. Both in the past and the present, feminism and women's individual rights are mostly like a broken cup. Patriarchy is an old propensity originating in male domination from ancient times. [...] The dictatorship and tenets of patriarchy that pervade the whole world originate in the labor-intense productivism that followed the end of matriarchy, so patriarchy is a category built upon human nature and nurture.

In the [Chinese] Constitution and as well as in the present world, men and women are declared to be equal, but in reality, in the past as well as now, the inability of women empowerment to overcome male domination seems as natural a phenomenon as flames rising up and water flowing down. Nonetheless, the movie aims at nurturing the freedom of women's inner minds and at providing an opportunity to deflate the constraints that bear on their behavior: in that perspective, it creates images that reflect current times and present opportunities. Dolkar's secret aspirations and renunciation to the pit of samsara produce a faint faith in women's capacities. This may be the wheel of

⁹⁸ A few lines from the original Tibetan essay, bracketed with ellipses in the English translation, are omitted in the translation.

life and death and their karmic retribution, and it may also be a multi-knotted riddle for crossing the desert of present time.

Change and Time

According to ancient treatises, “It is not time that changes, it is the people who change,” but the director’s camera shows that time changes and people change as well. If we adopt that perspective, changes in people are in reality an effect of time, while changes in time are also logically correlated with changes in people’s attitude. [...] Movies are a valuable mode to represent a reflection of social life. The gap between the attitude towards the world that is characteristic of the grandfather’s period, and the way to engage with the world for later generations, is a gap of time. In fact, the transition from one generation to the other involves both respect and cherishing and destruction. [...] The balloons in the movie are an enigma in the eyes of the grandfather; in the mind of Dhargye and his wife, they are like a thread produced by the samsara, but, in the eyes of the children, they are just toys in their playground. These are all different outlooks and perspectives about the world as grasped by different generations. Different perspectives concern various temporalities originating from changes in humanity and environment, drastic contemporary upheavals, and changing times.

Changes and Species

[...] The film *Balloon* indirectly hints at the destruction of species, treating threats to human life and fertility as its themes. It is hard to determine whether the change in species, or evolution, is due to the locality or the weather, but Dargye’s efforts at increasing the

number of his lower land sheep by borrowing a male sheep from the upper lands is a comment about evolution and changes in species. And the movie shows that change occurring in species is a basis for decline.

Looking at today's changes and modern pace in the land of nomads, the degeneration and poor quality of the species of yaks, dogs, horses, and sheep is a bad indication of the mixing of different species. Similarly, relationships between old and new generations in human society, and even inside one single generation, all have gone astray, like a river flowing out of its bed, so that the stability of local cultures and customs cannot be preserved and "fathers whose land is as strong as a palace, and sons whose homeland is as untamable as a tiger's nest," are being destroyed. The film reflects the director's worry about the new history in the evolution and the extinction of species.

Change and Films

The skill of a movie depends on the wisdom of its director, so in this movie, the relationships between the characters and the differences between the generations are differences in the perception of the eight worldly dharmas. It is the emotions, the happiness and sorrow of the characters that come from the eyes of the camera.

These differences are captured through filmic short takes, that evoke mood, happy or sad, and the relationship between characters in the plot.

Time and space determine the quality of the building of the plot of the movie. The transitions in the camera's lens, along with

the transitions that are the basis of the director's story, thanks to the sketchy narrative of *Balloon*, allow us to relate lives of a few people in a given place to the decline of fertility in the whole world.

History has decided that the life of the movie will be long-lasting due to the great wisdom of the producer.

It is historically proven that if a director has a long-term vision, the pulse of his or her films can remain alive.

[...]

The quality of artistry in *Balloon* does not surpass that of *Jinpa*, but in terms of its content, it is unique in the history of Tibetan cinema, since it deals with women's destiny and their timely choices. It is neither a film focused purely on aesthetics nor a film with visual effects aimed at the market. It is characterized by takes of various lengths, the use of numerous nuances of shades, and diverse visual effects. To take an example, the frame with flames flaring up from the fumigation oven or the incense burning at the doorstep unites with the overall image and the soundscape, conjuring up an evocation of the grandfather's cremated corpse and the father's affliction.

Moreover, in *Old Dog* and *Balloon*, as well as other films, the tightly woven pulse of the stories results in visual aesthetics imbued with a capacity to symbolize effortlessly images that are not conveyed through usual aesthetic means. Just taking natural light as an example, the shades and blurriness that form the background of the images contain assuredly countless more narrative treasures answering equally countless visual interrogations. Also, the blurriness of images is always justified by the plot and supports it: for instance, reflections

of characters' figures in the water evoke, through reversed images, the distance and opposition between this life and the next. In *Balloon*, the need to resort to a trembling, hand-held camera work in the manner of a documentary film is strongly linked to the fact that the film has to be interpreted as a story that is true to life, so the documentary style combined with a fictional genre introduces us to the free aesthetics and exploration flowing from the director's wisdom.

In fact, every historical view represented by images in movies is but the beauty of the director's free will.

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