

One Balloon and Two Balloons

Chamtruk

(Translated from Tibetan by Dorji Tsering)

Abstract: This short article critically discusses Pema Tseden's *Balloon*. It highlights Pema Tseden's use of intertextuality and conflict in his narrative style as well as employment of particular cinematic styles which create a sense of intimacy with the viewers.

Keywords: Intertextuality, conflict, narrative style, balloon, condom

In Pema Tseden's seventh Tibetan feature film, as in the previous ones, we can see an element of intertextuality. When we observe the whole creative course of this filmmaker, for instance the way he determines the general themes and meanings, the intertextuality seems to create a little tradition, which permeates all his movies. However, the tradition is not permanent or static, rather it flows—the latter follows the previous, and the previous moves forward again. For instance, the condom in the movie symbolizes faith and life, the contradiction between this [life] and the life after. The continuous shot, provided by the extensive employment of hand-held camera, gives a sense of inclusiveness or intimacy to the viewers. The combination of colors and fuzzy images attempts to create an aura of illusion and otherworldliness. All these examples manifest a new identity. This

constant experimentation from one invention to another makes it difficult to bring all his movies under a common genre. To me, this aspect of his movies has both pros and cons.

Just like the lay Tibetan writers since the 1980s have, through various literary forms, foregrounded the conflict between tradition and modernity, Pema Tseden too, intentionally, or unintentionally, right from the inception of his film career, has adhered to this conflict. Immediately after I watched the movie *Balloon*, I recalled the line from *Hamlet*: “To be or not to be, that’s the question.” The main characters from the movie—Dargye; and his wife Drolkar, Jangchup Dolma the nun; Takbum Gyal the teacher; and the elder boy Jamyang—all are entwined into a net of choices and dilemmas. The stretch of this net is extensive and multi-directional. Even though the movie only narrates the story of a single family, the narrative frame is highly complicated and condensed. This sort of narrative style has been regularly employed since his movie *Tharlo*. Though this feature is rare in Pema Tseden’s literary works, his movies have made it noticeably striking. This narrative style has also given way to fragmented characters and non-linear plots: one can say, [making a parallel with] the poetic treatise *Kavyadarsha*, that he has employed ‘subtle ornaments’ and ‘inclusive-assertion ornaments.’ These aspects may sometimes give us the impression that some of his movies are a result of a random collection of disparate events. Nonetheless, from the point of view of storytelling and narrative style, it is a trait of maturity. Besides, it offers in passing the grace of an art movie and of a writer’s movie. But a mere collection of events can never form by itself a seamless narration, so with this awareness, if we judge his movies, the level of their excellence ascends.

The balloon itself is an important character of the film, from being a white condom at the commencement to being a red balloon in the end; the grandfather dies and his spirit returns to its home; some of the families in the village face humiliation because of a condom; Dargye and his wife face condom shortage, obtain some and lose some again; the nun returns to the nunnery after having gone begging for donations; Drolkar is being taken from hospital to nunnery; Jamyang shows the intention of discontinuing school; the wishes of the two boys to obtain balloons is fulfilled, yet one balloon bursts and the other flies in the sky. The likes of such occurrences of small events are manifold. Any small event mentioned here has happened or is happening in Tibet. The narration is not indirect, distorted, and hyperbolic. Throughout the course of Pema Tseden's literary career, this effort towards a realistic representation of society is palpable. As always, from this movie too, we can see his realistic lens and disposition.

The condom in *Balloon* is a commodity brought from outside. Some of Pema Tseden's earlier movies too narrated the advent of modern things to Tibet, be it through direct or indirect means, in concrete physical form or in the form of idea. However, the narrative style of *Balloon* is tinged with an element of theatre. In the movie, different people perceive condom in different ways—for some, it is an object of shame while for others a bad omen, again for some it is a commodity to be consumed conveniently while for others it is just a toy. Likewise, we too have witnessed the arrival of new things and different forms of opposition to them. From this, according to me, we can understand that the regular narrative style from his earlier movies has changed and this change has widened the ambiguity with regard to the analysis of the movie. Additionally, this multi-perspective approach

to the condom—as the basis of consciousness, as the cause of death, and as just a balloon filled with air is highly connected with E.M. Foster’s notion of flat character and round character. This is why the characters, at the end of the movie, at different times and in different places, all look at the balloon from different angles.

(The Tibetan version of this review was first published in བཙོ་ཕྱོད་ཡིག་གསར་འགྲུ། *Qinghai News-Tibetan Edition* on 13 November 2020)

ཅི་ཅི་ཤེས་པའི་ཤེས་པ་དང་འབྱུང་།

འཇིག་གནས་མཐོངས་ཡངས།

15
2020-11-13

ཁྱེ་ལྟར་གྱི་གསུང་འཁྲུང་ཞིག

ཁོ་དང་བསྟན་པ།《དུག་ལྷན་གྱི་རྒྱུ》འདྲ་བའི་མཛེས་པའི་ཕྱི་ཆུང་དཔྱད

2002年1月1日至2002年12月31日

[illegible]

ရွှေအိမ်အောက်ကန်

[illegible][illegible]

ལྷ་མོ་སྐུ་འཁོར་གྱི་ཕྱོད་ཀྱི་

[illegible]

廣州府志卷之四十五
藝文志五

2007.05.24

[illegible][illegible]

འཕྲུག་གི་འཕྲུག་པ་

[illegible]

(अर्थऽप्यत्र ॥ १६ ॥ यत्रासीत् ।)

Film Cited

Pema Tsenden, director. *Balloon* [dbugs lgang], 2019.