

Review

Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet

Producer/Director: LUC SCHAEGLER; *Camera:* FILIP ZUMBRUNN; *Editors:* KATHRIN PLÜSS and MARTIN WITZ

DVD available: dvd@angrymonk.ch (Europe) and First Run/Icarus Films (USA), US\$40.00. CD-Rom available from angrymonk@angrymonk.ch, US\$50.00

The opening montage of Luc Schaedler's film, *Angry Monk*, brings together scenes of Buddhist monastic ritual with Tibetan women in traditional clothes dancing to disco music. An elderly man prostrates himself in a world where people play video games. In this way, the filmmaker signals his interest in the conundrum of contemporary Tibet—the co-existence of tradition and modernity, faith and entertainment. A sequence of archive footage follows. It is from the Tibetan uprising in 1989, when monks across Lhasa engaged in pitched battles with Chinese soldiers. These scenes, smuggled to the outside world, came to haunt Schaedler and led, ultimately, to the making of *Angry Monk*. How have Tibetans learned to live with the Chinese? How have they managed to reclaim their own cultural practices, especially Buddhism? How do people negotiate an everyday life of belief, compromise and resistance?

During Schaedler's investigations, he repeatedly came across a name from old Tibet—that of Gendun Choephel. Described in the commentary as “a wanderer between worlds”, worlds at once geographical, historical and cultural, Choephel began as a classically trained monk, but dissatisfied with the dogmatism and rigidity of Tibetan Buddhism, he abandoned monastic life and embarked on his own intellectual and spiritual journey. He became a free thinker, historian, ethnographer, and a prominent advocate of social and political reform. His life (1903–1951) spanned the crucial decades of the twentieth century when the destiny of Tibet hung in the balance. For the filmmaker, the fate of Gendun Choephel was inseparable from the fate of the nation itself, and his biography serves as the thread for an historical narrative that resonates beyond the details of a particular life.

Schaedler sets out to re-trace the footsteps of Choephel and thereby to chart the making of modern Tibet. The film unfolds as a narrated road movie in three parts.¹ The first documents Choephel's early years as a monk in north-eastern Tibet. Travelling by

bus across the Tibetan landscape, Schaedler takes us to the remote border town where the story begins. The monastery where Choephel first studied was rebuilt after the destruction of Chinese occupation and there has been a quiet resurgence of Buddhist practice. Interviewees recall his independent spirit and precocious curiosity about the world lying beyond Tibet's borders.

The second section of the film traces Choephel's remarkable transformation from a monastic scholar to worldly intellectual. At the age of seventeen he moved to Lhasa to study at Drepung, one of the most powerful monastic institutions in old Tibet. His arrival coincided with the period of reform initiated by the thirteenth Dalai Lama that was intended to both modernize and secure the country's independence. Choephel found monastic life insular and restrictive, and after two years, he left Drepung to live modestly and simply in one of Lhasa's backyards, supporting himself as a painter. His subsequent encounter with Indian independence activist, Rahul Sankrityayan, took him across Tibet's borders and inaugurated a period of self-imposed exile that lasted over 10 years. During his extended Indian sojourn, Choephel studied history and politics, became a writer, translator and commentator on cultural customs and practices, discovered the *Karma Sutra* and wrote his own version on the basis of his experiences and reflections on Tibetan sexuality.

The final part of *Angry Monk* documents Choephel's return to Tibet and his last years of defeat, imprisonment and disillusionment. The reforming impulse of the thirteenth Dalai Lama had been abruptly curtailed by his death. Conservative forces had regrouped, isolating Tibet from the broader world and rendering the nation more vulnerable than ever to Chinese ambitions. In 1945 Choephel traveled back across the Himalayas intending to write a political history of Tibet. He passed through Kalimpong, where he came into contact with a group of dissidents and activists committed, like himself, to the social and political reform of Tibet. Unknown to Choephel, the British had denounced him to the Tibetan government as a spy (that is, a communist). He was arrested on his arrival in Lhasa and spent three years in prison. Broken by this experience, his health never recovered and he died shortly after the arrival of Chinese troops in Lhasa. Some 40 years later, Choephel's writings on politics and history began to be discovered by a new generation of Tibetans. Their publication has secured his reputation as one of Tibet's most important intellectuals.

Angry Monk is a feature-length documentary. It has a running time of almost 100 minutes. The film is built from an impressive range of sources—including archival film and still photographs; footage of contemporary Tibet and India; extracts from Choephel's own writing; interviews with several contemporaries of Choephel (including Hugh Richardson, last British representative in Lhasa) and representatives of a younger generation of Tibetan intellectuals, poets and scholars. The film has been released as a DVD in four language versions (including Tibetan). Also available on the DVD are additional materials that relate to the film's making—for example, conversations with Schaedler, deleted scenes, and interviews not included in the final cut.

With this film, Schaedler intends to challenge some of the myths and idealized images of Tibet held by westerners and Tibetans alike. In particular, he is keen to puncture the notion of Tibet as a Shangri-la, reminding his viewers of the bitter, divisive and

violent nexus of struggle in the making of contemporary Tibet. It is a history and politics in which Tibet's ruling class—not least, the representatives of Buddhist monasticism—are acknowledged as active agents, not passive victims, their choices critical in shaping the fate of both the nation and its faith. Moreover, Schaedler's documentary queries the simple equation of Chinese occupation with cultural annihilation. Instead his film reveals a much more complicated, nuanced situation in which recuperation *and* innovation, adaptation *and* resistance are the characteristics of everyday cultural practice.

Angry Monk is an ambitious and accomplished work. Gendun's Choephel's story is a compelling one and it is exceptionally well-told by Schaedler. In addition, *Angry Monk* is distinguished by consistently high production values, despite the fact that it was shot using lower-end recording technology that enabled Schaedler and his crew to evade Chinese surveillance and pass themselves off as tourists while filming in Tibet. The images are expertly composed. The interviews and commentary are informative and engaging. The tempo of the film is finely measured. *Angry Monk* should appeal to a wide and diverse audience and has already enjoyed considerable success—it has been selected for screening by such prestigious venues as the Vancouver, Munich and Sundance festivals. Judged in these terms, we might assume that Schaedler's film could well serve as an effective catalyst for rethinking the conventional historical, political and cultural narratives of contemporary Tibet.

Angry Monk was made by Schaedler as an integral part of his doctorate in anthropology at the University of Zurich. It thus raises a number of interesting questions for those in the field of visual anthropology. In particular, it allows us to consider the possibilities of pursuing historical anthropology through film. Why explore intersections of past and present through the medium of video rather than text? What might a film allow an anthropologist to do with life histories or biography that writing does not? How might we evaluate Schaedler's work in the light of recent developments in ethnographic film?

It is clear that one of the primary reasons that Schaedler embarked on a film biography of Gendun Choephel was to reach a broad audience rather than to address only a narrow group of academic specialists and established commentators on Tibet. Given the enormous media profile of the Dalai Lama and public interest in Buddhism, it is both legitimate—and important—to question taken-for-granted assumptions about Tibet and its history. For many scholars, anthropologists and historians and, no doubt, for Tibetan scholars too, working with film means popularization. Film, it is often assumed, is merely a passive medium, a way to *illustrate* arguments pursued through conventional, textual means. It is not understood as a medium of intellectual enquiry in its own right. The situation, however, is not so simple, as many in the field of visual anthropology have pointed out.² For, although, Schaedler's intention is to work with the genre of documentary as a way of extending his audience, he is also concerned to use the distinctive aesthetic features of the medium to articulate his argument. Hence the film is not conceived as an extract from, or simplification of, a more serious intellectual endeavor. It is, from the outset, regarded as an integral and legitimate part of his scholarly project. A major problem with *Angry Monk* is that the evidence of the film

suggests otherwise. It is hard to avoid interpreting the film as a conventionally—and heavily—narrated story in which images and interviews are recruited to illustrate an argument already in place.

In a number of places within the film and its accompanying material, Schaedler draws attention to the different ways in which he attempts to synthesize the distinctive qualities of his medium with the substance of his enquiry. The trope of the road movie is crucial to this endeavor. By working with such a motif, he seeks to harness the momentum embedded in film itself to his narration of Gendun Choephel's life and to his own discovery of it. The succession of images charts the physical and spiritual journey undertaken by the subject and retraced some 50 years later by the maker of the film. Moreover, as a road movie, *Angry Monk* invites its audience to embark imaginatively on an analogous journey through time and space. Travelling with Schaedler through Tibet and India becomes an important means of foregrounding the complex interplay of past and present. The interweaving of history and contemporary life is signaled in the film's contrasting camera styles. For example, scenes from present-day Tibet are filmed from a position of proximity in which the camera stays close to its subject, while historical materials are filmed at a distance. Moreover, Schaedler's choice of recording equipment, while allowing the filmmaker to evade Chinese official scrutiny, also reflects his commitment to challenging popular images of Tibet. Hence the visual quality of the film, the lack of a professionalized high definition finish, is intended to replace the prevalent glossy pictures of Tibet with something that more closely resembles the harsh, dry, windswept realities of the high Himalayan plateau.

What does it mean to see a hidden courtyard in present-day Lhasa where Choephel once lived as a painter after leaving Drepung monastery? This is one of the intriguing sites in Schaedler's documentation of Choephel's life and, like many of the others found along the way, it reminds us that history is concrete, material and embedded in specific places. It is only through the film's narration that such sites are rendered meaningful, but the image of the courtyard confounds its explanation, remaining an enigmatic, resistant space in which the past irrupts into the present. Following Berger, we might say that we glimpse here the possibility of another way of telling.

Early on in *Angry Monk*, Schaedler raises a question that goes to the heart of the matter—why try to use an image-based medium to tell the story of an invisible, or largely invisible, subject? One of the disappointing aspects of Schaedler's documentary is that he could have done much more as a filmmaker with this crucial paradox. Having acknowledged that there are only a handful of blurry photographs of Gendun Choephel and no archival film footage, he does not explore the unusual possibilities offered by his medium to suggest the gaps, lacunae and silences that mark the story that he seeks to tell. In one of the interviews with Schaedler included on the DVD, he explains that the use of a slow moving camera across images of Gendun Choephel is a device intended to suggest the vagueness and intangible quality of the central subject. In this way, he seeks to render the haunting presence of Gendun Choephel rather than presenting clear, incontrovertible evidence of his central place in modern Tibetan history. Unfortunately, the film's overall visual and aural style tends to work against devices of this kind. For the composition of the images and the almost seamless

commentary that accompanies the images serves to obscure questions about what can be seen and known, giving the viewer little space to reflect on these problems or to critically evaluate the materials assembled by the filmmaker.

Given his interest in engaging diverse audiences, it is possible that Schaedler decided against a filmmaking approach that might appear too "experimental", that is one in which the veracity of the medium was disrupted through montage, blurred images, discordant sound, silence, a blank screen and so on. As a consequence, the film is paradoxically less interesting aesthetically than it might have been. By this I refer not to the notion that a film should be formally self-conscious for its own sake but, instead, to the possibility that a bolder use of techniques might have more effectively expressed the intellectual and methodological challenges of the project.

Angry Monk belongs to the distinctive collection of ethnographic films that is concerned with individual biography. Although surprisingly small as a category, it contains notable work—for example, Jorge Prelorán's *Imaginero* (1970), John Marshall's *Nai! Story of a !Kung Bushwoman* (1980) and David and Judith MacDougall's *Lorang's Way* (1979). Of course, documenting the lives of human subjects has traditionally been at the heart of ethnographic filmmaking. Typically, though, this has involved focusing on particular moments, events or relationships in peoples' lives rather than pursuing more extended personal narratives or life-histories. Films of the latter kind, *Angry Monk* included, raise interesting questions about the materials an anthropological filmmaker brings together in constructing a biography and how a balance is struck between individual personality and social and historical context.

The aesthetic possibilities offered by the medium of film are important to acknowledge here—not least because ethnographic biography has long been marked by a high degree of innovation. Filmmakers working in this genre were quick to recognize that the problem of how to represent a life had to be made an integral part of the representation itself. Prelorán's portrait of Hermógenes Cayo, an image maker living on the high Argentinian plateau, was assembled after the death of his subject. The film is remarkable for its juxtaposition of striking images and discordant sound, interwoven with the voice recordings made by Prelorán of Hermógenes narrating his own life story. In the case of *Nai! Story of a !Kung Bushwoman*, Marshall experimented with a dialogical form, the exchanges between himself and his subject becoming the basis for an investigation of the recent history of !Kung San people in South West Africa, now Namibia. The MacDougalls pursue yet another strategy in *Lorang's Way*. Here they present different kinds of evidence about Lorang—including his own self-presentation, commentaries by his contemporaries, and observational sequences of his behavior and actions in different cultural settings. There is a foregrounding of the problem of evidence and the filmmakers draw our attention to the processes by which we reach conclusions about a life.

Schaedler faced a particular challenge in *Angry Monk*. His subject, dead for 50 years, existed only through his writing, memory and sparse visual documentation. Painstakingly then, the filmmaker must gather scraps of evidence from here and there, supplementing it with archival footage and selected interview material. Not least, Gendun Choephel's journal serves as one of the most valuable sources, offering

insight into the unique way that Choephel went about experiencing, interpreting, and describing the worlds he discovered as he journeyed through Tibet and India. Schaedler certainly succeeds in bringing back to life a forgotten figure from Tibet's past, but the scope of his project establishes serious limitations on what he can do as a filmmaker, forcing him back on the rather unfashionable conventions of the narrated documentary.

One of the features that sets *Angry Monk* apart from the aforementioned examples of ethnographic film biography is the scale of Schaedler's historical narrative. Central to *Nail*, *Imaginero* and *Lorang's Way* is the filmmakers' careful situation of their human subjects in history. Although illuminating of broader social and political conditions, Prelorán, Marshall and the MacDougalls remain, nevertheless, firmly committed to the details of an individual life. Schaedler's biography of Gendun Choephel is conceived differently. The filmmaker seeks to use Choephel's life in the service of a much more ambitious and expansive narrative—the making of modern Tibet. The complexity of this task leads Schaedler to rely heavily on commentary, with the film images serving largely as the illustrative counterpart to an interpretation articulated through discursive means. In this way and in a number of other ways, *Angry Monk* appears to be out of step with the techniques and approaches that characterize much contemporary ethnographic filmmaking.

Over the last 40 years or so, the dependence on commentary as *the* central structuring device of documentary film has been considered highly problematic. It is held to foster a passive viewing experience in which audiences are told something rather than given the opportunity to actively explore the evidence that filmmakers placed before them. In most cases, too, commentary comprised a disembodied voice imposed from outside the film and disconnected from relationships that constituted the work. Although the omniscient narrator has all but disappeared from the ethnographic documentary, a new kind of commentary has come increasingly to the fore. It is personal narration, a technique that allows filmmakers to chart a process of exploration and discovery and to make manifest their own participation in it.

At the beginning of *Angry Monk*, Schaedler declares a personal investment in the inquiry his film represents; but throughout *Angry Monk* the commentary comes across as curiously impersonal. The generic quality of the narrator's voice in the film's English version serves to render the uneven, difficult and fascinating aspects of the research process into a series of summarizing statements. Hence aside from inhibiting the audience's own exploration of materials, the commentary leaves out much that is interesting about the research process itself—that is, how did Schaedler first come across Choephel, where did he find his paintings and journal, where does the archive footage come from, how were relatives and close associates of Choephel located, on what basis were interviewees selected and so on. Although some of these details are available on a CD-Rom that accompanies *Angry Monk*, their inclusion as an integral part of the filmic narrative would have significantly enhanced the intellectual texture of the piece. The use of talking heads in the film is similarly problematic, since Schaedler gives his audience very little to work with in terms of evaluating personal testimony. Frustratingly, too, he provides us with no opportunity to consider other perceptions of Choephel's

contribution to Tibetan history—not least how it might appear to the current Dalai Lama and his representatives.

Despite these reservations—indeed because of them—*Angry Monk* promises to contribute to debates across several fields of enquiry. Schaedler's film and associated materials will clearly be important to those working in Tibetan Studies. With great skill and insight, he makes an individual life illuminate the complex intersections of past and present, tradition and modernity, religion and politics, history and subjectivity in the making of modern Tibet. His film also raises broader questions about new forms of academic scholarship. Thinking critically about the decisions Schaedler made as a *film-maker*, his choice of techniques and particular documentary approach, is a crucial first step in exploring the possibilities of film as a medium of historical and anthropological knowledge. *Angry Monk* may not entirely succeed in convincing skeptics of film's potential in academic enquiry but it will undoubtedly serve as a valuable model for those committed to the intellectual seriousness of non-textual forms.

Notes

- [1] In this review, I use the term "film" in a broad sense to encompass the different formats of celluloid, video and digital video.
- [2] Most notably David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998, and *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2006.

ANNA GRIMSHAW
The Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts
Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA
© 2008 Anna Grimshaw

VME
2-18
79

History and Anthropology

Volume 19 Number 1 March 2008

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| All Aboard the Nilgiri Express!—Sustained Links between Anthropology and a Single Indian District Paul Hockings | 1 |
| “The Balkans’ Other within”: Imaginings of the West in the Republic of Macedonia Vasiliki P. Neofotistos | 17 |
| “Why Are You Mixing what Cannot be Mixed?” Shared Devotions in the Monotheisms Dionigi Albera | 37 |
| From Hope to Escape: Post-Soviet Russian Memory and Identity Christopher Ohan | 61 |
| Review Essay Michael Stewart | 77 |
| Review | 83 |

**Völkerkundemuseum
der Universität Zürich**
Bibliothek
Pelikanstrasse 40, 8001 Zürich