

Tibet – A Projection Screen for Western Fantasies?

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“Truth, perhaps, is not the goal; truth, perhaps, is the way.”

Chris. Marker (1962)

By listening to its Tibetan echoes, the West could perhaps discover its own questions.

Peter Bishop (1989)

The following article is based on impressions I gathered while viewing well over a hundred “Tibet films”. In the five works discussed here, a structure becomes clearly visible that recurs in almost all Tibet films – Tibet becomes a projection screen for Western fantasies. The attempted analysis is intended as an instrument (and a method) for looking critically at films that have been (and are being) made about Tibet, and for including one’s own person in this reflection. By way of example, the analysis also refers to films that have been shown on Swiss and German television in recent years, such as: DAS ALTE LADAKH (1987), TIBET – WIDERSTAND DES GEISTES (1989), LUNG-TA: LES CAVALIERS DU VENT (1990), the “Brückner” films (arte, 1994), and of course also LITTLE BUDDHA (1994) by Bertolucci.

Most documentary films (and feature films) about Tibet open with a pan across the snow-capped Himalayas, the furrowed faces of meditating monks, or the golden roofs of Buddhist temples. Dissolves merge Buddhas and burning wicks of butter lamps with the faces of praying believers. Others open with a shot of a large world map showing where Tibet lies – and, above all, how remote and difficult to reach it is. The music accompanying these images varies from film to film, from psychedelic synthesizer music to deep Tibetan monastic chants or pompous classical music reminiscent of Hollywood adventure films. The commentary that will guide us through the entire film sets in only later. From such opening sequences, three patterns typical of all Tibet films can be distilled: *the mystical*, *the inaccessible* and *the voiceless*.

The notion of the *mystical* has hardly changed over the years (since the first contacts between Europe and Tibet in the 16th century): in the West, Tibet is seen as a secluded and therefore all the more mysterious land, with “high-perched monasteries”, a “centuries-old mystical knowledge”, “living Buddhas” and “meditating yogis capable of miracles”. The invasion of the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s and the massive

destruction of Tibetan culture before (!) and during the Cultural Revolution have done nothing to dent these (Western) fantasies. They have simply relocated them geographically from Tibet to India, where, for more than thirty years, the Dalai Lama has been living in exile with the monastic elite and around one hundred thousand Tibetan refugees.

Much the same applies to *the inaccessible*, which has likewise scarcely changed over the years: where transport problems (distance, mountains, lack of infrastructure, luggage, money, etc.) and political factors were once held responsible, today inaccessibility is simply asserted – Tibet is to remain the “forbidden land”. Both *the mystical*, and *the inaccessible* of Tibet – and above all their artificial perpetuation – correspond far more to Western fantasies than to reality:

Tibet as a projection screen for Western fantasies has a long history, one that ran parallel to Europe’s colonial expansion into Asia. In his book *The Myth of Shangri-La (1989)*, on Tibetan adventure and travel literature, Peter Bishop convincingly shows how conceptions of Tibet have, over the centuries, been adapted to developments within Europe. Each generation has invented its own Tibet: while initially it was the landscape (“impassable mountains”, “hidden mountain passes”, “endless high plateaus”, etc.) that captured the Western imagination, this place was later taken by “forbidden Lhasa”. The myth surrounding Lhasa was in turn, after the military conquest of the “holy city” by England (1904), replaced by an interest in Tibetan Buddhism, which was (and is) now seen as the last refuge of Tibet’s mystical heritage.

This Western conception of Tibet, however, also reflects real power relations, which are most clearly expressed in the third pattern, the imposed *voicelessness* of Tibet: Tibet has no voice; it is spoken for. This can be illustrated (clearly) above all through films about Tibet. When Tibetans are quoted in the films, it happens only as a footnote or as proof of a claim made by the filmmaker. Tibet as a subject does not exist; only the filmmaker, who is searching for something – and who, incidentally, usually also finds it (!). The truth about Tibet is not developed together with Tibetans in the film; it is asserted by the filmmaker. This applies to a strong degree also to films that deal with Tibetan Buddhism. There is no film about Tibet that does not, in one form or another, address Buddhism. What changes from genre to genre is only the motivation and the precision with which it is depicted.

The *archive films*, shot in black and white before the Chinese invasion of the early 1950s, are without exception expedition and travel reports. At the centre of these films is always the arduous journey and the protagonists’ claim to have been the first to succeed in penetrating into “forbidden Tibet”. Tibetan Buddhism is scarcely treated in terms of

content, but it is documented cinematically: these are the very first film recordings of “inaccessible” monasteries, of Buddhist frescoes, Buddha statues, practising monks, “magical” rituals and pilgrims “tirelessly” turning their prayer wheels. The filmmakers’ commentaries express a fascination with the omnipresence of Buddhism in the everyday life of Tibetans, but lack any deeper religious understanding.

The *political films and TV reports* from the 1960s onwards are concerned mainly with the (idealised) history and the political fate of Tibet. Tellingly, their structure resembles that of the archive films. At the centre are the political adventures and the great risks the filmmaker takes upon himself in order to expose the atrocities of the People’s Republic of China in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism is treated because it is inseparable from the (mystified) history of Tibet and because it can simultaneously be put to political use. The portrayal of the “non-violent religion”, whose “centuries-old mystical knowledge” is being destroyed, is meant to contrast with the violent side of the communist occupiers. Ironically, the anger and grief over Tibet’s progressive destruction always carries a note of self-pity – it is apparently not the Tibetan people who are losing something, but the West!

The *religious films* make up the largest share of Tibet films and are the standard-bearers of the myth that has formed around Tibet. Astonishingly, no general overview of Tibetan Buddhism can be found among these films. Only the visually interesting, esoteric aspects are filmed – monastic dances in remote monasteries, rare “rediscovered” rituals and initiations, the phenomenon of reincarnation, or the sexual symbolism of Tantrism. What is commonly sold as Tibetan Buddhism in the religious films is in fact only the specialised knowledge of a small, schooled monastic elite that devotes its entire life to philosophical problems. The effects of this specialised knowledge on the rather unspectacular everyday life of ordinary monks, nuns, nomads and farmers are usually mentioned only when this can be used to bring out the “contentment”, the “rootedness in their own culture” and the “deep devotion” of the Tibetan people. Tibetan Buddhism thus becomes the vehicle of a utopia which, consciously or unconsciously, is meant to contrast with the alienated everyday life of the West. As such, the religious films say at least as much about Western fantasies and longings as they do about Tibetan Buddhism itself. In their structure, too, they resemble the archive and political films.

In *LE MESSAGE DES TIBÉTAINS* (Eng. *The Message of the Tibetans*, 1965), one of the most important religious films, a brief overview is followed by a detailed exposition of the esoteric practices of Tibetan Buddhism. The filmmaker (and, unfortunately, not the monks being filmed!) leads us ever deeper into the “secret aspects” of Tantrism, until at the end of the film we are rewarded for our long wait as the “first witnesses of the secret yoga

exercises” of an important Tibetan monk. The filmmaker’s commentary: “Only a few years ago, any chance witness of these secret exercises would have been punished in the most severe way!”

Something similar applies to the film *THE LORD OF THE DANCE: DESTROYER OF ILLUSION* (1985), which became a cinema hit in various European countries. Here, too, we become witnesses of a “unique ritual” that, after a long interruption, is being celebrated for the first time again in a Tibetan monastery in Nepal. The abbot of the monastery, who is the only person (!) to possess the knowledge for this ritual, had fled to Nepal from the Chinese occupiers in 1959 together with the monks of the “highest-altitude monastery in Tibet”. An ethnologist has now “discovered” this ritual and made it accessible to the West through his film. Despite the reservations expressed here regarding the *religious films*, many of them are, where the (visual) representation of specific rituals is concerned, important and irreplaceable sources of information.

It seems important to me briefly to discuss three further films whose treatment of Tibetan Buddhism stands out from the others. A telling passage can be found in Schäfer’s film *GEHEIMNIS TIBET (1944, archive film)*, shot during a Nazi expedition. Full of naïve misconceptions about Buddhism, it is nonetheless the only film at all that describes the Tibetan monastic cities not just (idealisingly) as spiritual centres, but also as centres of political power (!), and thereby breaks a taboo that remains untouched even today.

RAID INTO TIBET (1962, political film) depicts the raid of a Tibetan guerrilla unit on a convoy of the Chinese People’s Army. In a prayer with monks invoking the help of the protector deities, the men prepare themselves for the coming battle. The unannotated linking of the shared prayer with the Tibetan struggle for liberation alone makes Buddhism appear in a wholly different light – namely within a contradictory social and political field of tension.

One of the most important films is certainly *THE REINCARNATION OF KHENSUR RINPOCHE (1991, religious film)*. This film, shot by an Indian woman and an (exile) Tibetan – which alone makes it unique – describes a simple monk’s search for the reincarnation of his deceased master. At the centre of the film stands not the search and the discovery of the young boy, but rather the process of the monk, who from one day to the next becomes a “father” and has to bear a new responsibility. With great sensitivity, the filmmakers succeed in portraying the little boy not only as a “living Buddha”, but also as a little rascal who squeals with delight as he destroys his Lego castle at play. In one beautiful scene, the boy nearly touches the lens of the 16 mm camera with his nose and says to the monk who has been trying in vain to stop him: “Look, in there in the camera, I can see my nose running.” The phenomenon of reincarnation is not addressed in the film; for Tibetans it is a fact and

hence hardly worth talking about. Apart from a few silent films (!) from the 1930s, for once it is really the images that speak. Nor is there any need for the commentary of a self-appointed specialist. For once, it is Tibetans who come to speak in full. It was slowly time.

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