Schaedler, Luc. 2005. *Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet*. Zurich: Angry Monk Productions. 97 min. English, German, French and Tibetan.

Rebel with a cause: debunking the mythical mystical Tibet

Mara Matta

In May 2003 I heard that a documentary was being made about the famous Tibetan monk Gendun Choephel (in Tibetan, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel). I was in Dharamsala, India, interviewing Tibetan filmmakers who were producing the first Tibetan feature films to challenge the stereotyped Tibet conveyed by Hollywood. The Tibetan scholar Tashi Tsering told me about director Luc Schaedler' s painstaking effort and research: he' d travelled throughout Asia for many years to collect information about Choephel and interview people who had known him and scholars who had been researching this controversial figure now so popular among intellectuals and Tibetan youngsters as an incarnation of the rebellious spirit of 'Tibetanness'. As Schaedler says:

> *'While their parents lost Tibet, the younger generation looked for role models that would allow a critical view of their own society. But the western world only slowly became aware of Choephel because his life story doesn' t mesh with our rigid image of Tibet, which prefers to portray Tibetans as victims rather than the makers of their own history'.*[1]

A best-selling New Age commodity

The long history of Tibet's cinematic representation intersects with politics, power and diplomacy. Perhaps no film can claim to be an objective portrayal of a civilisation, but filming in Tibet in particular was never a neutral act of documenting the culture. In the 1920s the British sent their first missions to Mount Everest and experienced the great difficulty of shooting film in Tibet. Apart from being 'tremendously expensive', there was the 'ever-present temptation to heighten the incident, to stage effects, to compete with the product of the studio, and thereby to increase its value as a public entertainment, but ruin it as a sincere record of events'.[2] Tibetans themselves, however, were aware of the need to negotiate the cinematic representation of their culture and religious traditions in ways that clearly challenged the assumption that Tibetans had always been victims of the Orientalistic view without having any real agency in it. As Peter Hansen states, '...the Everest expeditions redefined the power of Orientalism, the power to represent the Other, as the possession of both British and Tibetans'.[3]

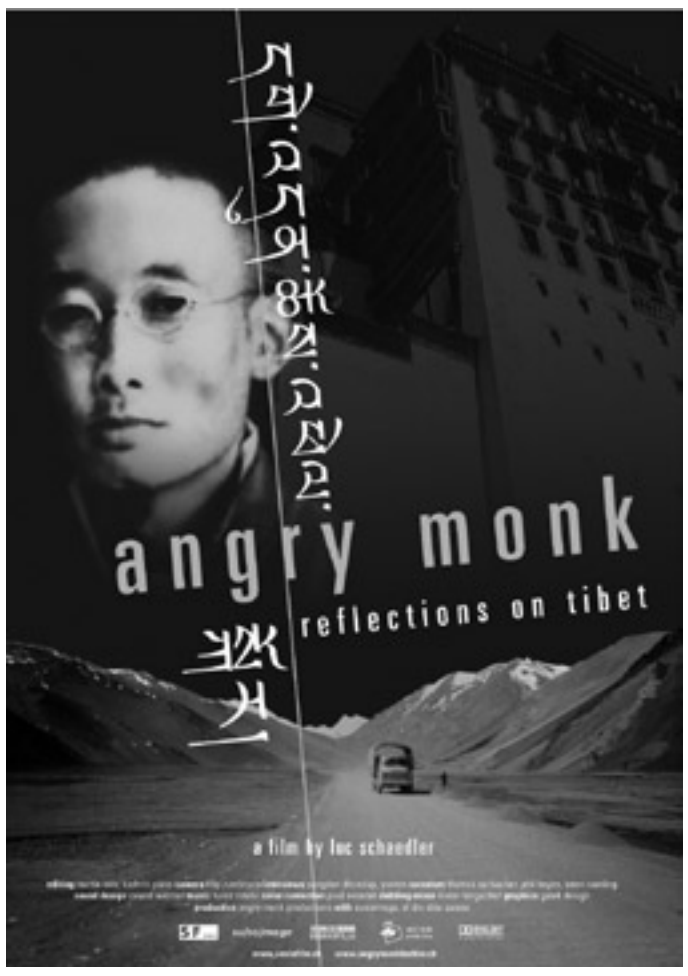
This fiercely negotiated relationship must be taken into account when viewing Schaedler's 'Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet', especially when comparing it to the many other films and documentaries on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in particular.[4] Schaedler himself claims that his film is meant to counter those documentaries 'full of admiration for the monasteries, for the lamaism and also for the nomadic society which has been celebrated as a remnant of an age-old, intact culture.'[5] Such attitudes have strongly affected the Western vision: Tibet as fairy-land, mystical kingdom, a lost paradise to be rediscovered, saved and preserved as an antidote to the Western materialistic way of life is a paradigm that has flattened the complex history of this ancient civilisation.

While Spencer Chapman described the Tibetan nomads in Lhasa in 1937 as 'attractive-looking people' and 'proud sunburnt men with a faraway look in their eyes',[6] Hollywood was releasing Frank Capra's 'Lost Horizon', which created the long-lasting myth of Tibet as Shangri-La. During the last 70 years hardly any film challenged this mythical view. If, as claimed by the Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu, 'Hollywood, more than anyone else, could perhaps be held responsible for foisting the 'magic and mystery' image of Tibet',[7] Tibetans themselves must also take responsibility for helping to nurture it. The images of a victimised Tibet and endangered culture that must be saved from the ravages of the Chinese have become best-selling New Age commodities.

Leaving out the West and the Dalai Lama to focus on one monk's struggle to tell the truth

This is the current perception against which Schaedler's film must be viewed. When screened in Rome in November 2006, at the seventh annual '*Asiatica Film Mediale*', I was curious not only to watch the film but to see the audience's reaction. Interestingly, the festival director chose to screen the film last and not on the same day as the three other Tibet-related films. In previous days, John Bush's documentary 'Vajra Sky Over Tibet', Liliana Cavani's 'Milarepa' (1974) and the Tibetan lama Neten Chokling Rinpoche's 'Milarepa' (2006) were shown, preceded by introductions to Tibetan Buddhism and Milarepa and followed by a discussion with an audience keen to know about the history of a 'holy' Tibet. When I heard the same old stories being told, I thought back to the much more conflicted audience reaction to the Tibetan filmmaker Pema Dondhup's 'We' re No Monks' presented in Naples and Rome in 2004. That film portrays the anger and frustration of exiled young Tibetans, one of whom resorts to terrorism and finally becomes a suicide bomber. Part of the audience reacted very strongly to what they regarded as an act that could not possibly be committed by a representative of the 'peaceful Tibetans' and vented their anger at the director, accusing him of misrepresenting his own culture, which was for them the last hope for world peace.

'Angry Monk' also raised a great deal of interest but not the same degree of criticism and denial. I assume it's been far more difficult for a general audience to criticise a film presented as historical fact. Following the arc of Choephel's life, the audience is drawn into the complexities of recent Tibetan history, with all its contradictions and unsolved issues. Choephel wanted to challenge the political power of the conservative clergy by writing the first historical account of Tibet that would not rely on a Buddhist interpretation of historical facts. In 1946, on his return to Lhasa from a decade of travels in India and Sri Lanka which exposed him to new cultures and ideas and deeply affected his thought and behaviour Choephel



was imprisoned by the conservative Tibetan authorities on trumped up charges of counterfeiting and treason. Toni Huber points out that 'it is certain his detention was motivated by the Tibetan elite's fears of his newly made progressive political connections, and perhaps more so by his outspoken criticisms against the traditional government and monastic system and the jealousy of enemies he had made within it'.[8] He was released from Nangtse Shak Prison in May 1949, but took to drink and cigarettes and his health deteriorated. He never fully recovered and passed away in 1951, at 47 years old. His historical book, *The White Annals* (in Tibetan, *Deb ther dkar po*), despite being left unfinished, became a reference for all research on Tibetan history.

Alternating archival footage with interviews and images of contemporary life, Schaedler succeeds in producing a fairly balanced account of this controversial figure. Although he has been accused of using 'Choephel's life as a metaphor to drive [his own] view on the politics of Tibet',[9] the director is justified in his opinion that the film is not a 'purely biographical film on Gendun Choephel, but he serves as a key to the understanding of the history and the complex present of Tibet'. His choice to exclude his interviews with Western Tibetologists and the Dalai Lama might be questioned, but the film's credibility doesn't suffer for it. Rather, by concentrating on one key historical figure instead of trying to exhaust the intricate subject of recent Tibetan cultural history within a mere two-hour film, it sets an example for future documentaries, highlighting the need to present a more complex and better researched image of Tibetan culture.

The art of demystification: digesting the indigestible

As Tibetan cinema is beginning to flourish in the Diaspora, with more young Tibetans turning to filmmaking as a professional career, there is a risk that this new trend might be used to foster what Klieger calls 'indigenous Tibetan hyperreality...created from a conscious and selective presentation of self to an audience with highly conditioned expectations'.[10] He says the Tibetan culture presented in the West is indeed 'idealized, homogenated [sic] and pasteurized' to the extent that any challenge to this conventional image is deemed indigestible.

Though no less challenging, 'Angry Monk' may be easier to swallow. It's a thought-provoking film that introduces the Western public to a new way of looking at Tibet as a real country with a complex history and a far less mystical reality than they may have thought or hoped for. Less idealised, Tibet emerges as a land of intricacies where Buddhism sometimes contributed to a certain deal of obscurantism. While the film enlightens the general public, it could also be an excellent didactic tool in university courses and seminars. It would be truly disappointing if even now the same forces that imprisoned Choephel would once again hide reality, discarding it in favour of the mystified image so welcome in the West. Schaedler's film is a non-conformist representation that follows in Choephel's rebellious steps to debunk such myths as misrepresentations.

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Notes

1 See 'Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet' Press Kit at <http://www.angrymonkthefilm.ch/en/press/>.
2 January 1923. 'The Mount Everest Kinematograph Film'. *The Geographical Journal* 61-1: 48-51.
3 Hansen, Peter. 1966. 'The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s'. *The American Historical Review* 101-3: 744.
4 Grunfeld, Tom. Last updated 10 January 2008. 'Films and Videos on Tibet'. <http://www1.esc.edu/personalfac/tgrunfeld/>.
5 Op. cit., 'Angry Monk...'.
6 Chapman, F. Spencer. 1938. 'Lhasa in 1937'. *The Geographical Journal* 91-6: 501.
7 Norbu, Jamyang. Continually updated. 'Cinema and Tibet: A Brief Historical Overview'. <http://www.freespiritfestival.com/film/articles/jamyang_norbu-cinema_and_tibet.html>.
8 Huber, Toni. 2000. *The Guide to India. A Tibetan Account by Amdo Gendun Chöphel*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 4-5.
9 Voynar, Kim. 2006. 'Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet.' *Sundance Review*. <http://www.cinematical.com/2006/01/19/sundance-review-angry-monk-reflections-on-tibet/>.
10 Klieger, Christiaan. 1997. 'Shangri-La and Hyperreality: A Collision in Tibetan Refugee Expression'. Korom, Franz J., ed. *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora, Papers presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graaz 1995*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 67.