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Vajra Sky Over Tibet

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Abstract

This is a review of *Vajra Sky Over Tibet* (2006).

While each frame of this film is saturated with noble intentions (the Dalai Lama has given it his blessings!) and the story within it deserves to be known around the world, *Vajra Sky Over Tibet* offers little as a cinematic document for those cinephiles who savor the visual treats of films such as *Dreams* (Kurosawa), *Koyaanisqatsi* (Reggio) or *Gerry* (Van Sant) and prefer their aesthetics to do justice to a film's meaning or message.

Vajra Sky Over Tibet is the third installment of John Bush's *Yatra Trilogy* (*Dharma River*, *Prajna Earth*). It is your standard "show and tell" type of documentary, in which invisible narrators tell the tourist-viewer everything he or she needs to know in order to have a meaningful experience watching the images that pass by as through windows on a tour bus. But let's not overlook the more important reality beyond these frames: we are told about the effects of the 1949 Chinese occupation of Tibet that have violently endangered and displaced Tibetan Buddhists – many of which have been forced to decide between exile in India or face possible torture or murder at home. Bush, an American director who has been living in Asia for several years, teams up with a two-person Tibetan crew (whose names are kept anonymous) in order to travel, without permission from the Chinese authorities, through the Tibetan landscape documenting the daily lives of its people, ostensibly to help preserve a civilization seen to be in radical decline (fewer and fewer teachers of certain healing rituals; whole groups that have "vanished").

The structure of the film consists of a voice-over narration of the political history of Chinese-Tibetan relations since 1949. Alternating between the voice of the director, Tibetan musician Dadon and Tibetan Tenzin L. Choegyal (who served as an advisor to Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Seven Years In Tibet*), the narration enlightens the viewer on matters concerning what may fairly be called the remainders of Buddhist Tibet: the defacement of statues and sculptures in temples that the Chinese converted into slaughterhouses, pig styes and grain warehouses; then the restoration in the 1980's of "what were seen as Chinese cultural treasures;" the removal and prohibition of all photos of the Dalai Lama throughout Tibet; and the fear that when the 14th Dalai Lama passes away, Chinese authorities will install a puppet figure of their own in his name. To illustrate these realities, Bush's own camera work records all the familiar iconography of Buddhist culture and Tibetan landscapes – statues of smiling Buddhas, the Himalayas, the yaks, prayer wheels and scarves, mandalas and wall paintings. The director has the uncomfortable tendency of returning to extreme close-ups of young children staring into the lens, as though deliberately or naively constructing an encounter with an Other. Images that are unquestionably breathtaking and holy when actually experienced become faded icons of themselves on the big screen.

Nevertheless, for all of the film's aesthetic disappointments (overexposed images, a dirty lens, poor digital camera resolution and the one-sided, idealized and

simplified presentation of Tibetan culture), *Vajra* merits the attention of all scholars working at the intersections of religion, politics and culture. One of the film's more intriguing and commendable moments is a segment that follows women in the nunneries who have given up domestic duties in order to lead a more spiritual life. Many representations of Buddhist culture tend to focus on the activities of male monks to the exclusion of the women. Here the women are seen singing as they ink thousands of prayer scrolls in preparation for the dharma chambers.

As the director reminds us, Buddhist thought is striking for its relevance for modern times. Unfortunately, the film spends little time, aside from a poetic quotation, with the philosophical foundations of Buddhist thought, opting instead to focus on its extrinsic identifiers. But a space is certainly constructed in which one can begin to step outside oneself and question the larger structures of violence shared by groups around the globe. The Buddhist commitment to tolerance is effaced in the sad irony of the events depicted by the film.

One problem the film sets itself, then, seems to be the question of how to invoke the divine? "Vajra," the director's voice-over tells us, refers to the "thunderbolt" experience of enlightenment. Watching this film might be a bit like listening to someone tell you about the distant grumblings of the air.