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Shangri-La in Exile

By Elliott Stein

TIBET: A BUDDHIST TRILOGY. Written and directed by Graham Coleman. Produced by David Lascelles for Thread Cross Films Ltd. A Teleculture release. At the Vandam, June 8-21.

Graham Coleman's *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*, an epic documentary of spirituality in exile, is one of the most singular films in years, unsettling, uneven—and, not surprisingly, for it is concerned with a religion and a culture to which art and form are central—a compellingly beautiful object.

A bit of background first: after China invaded, Tibet accepted its suzerainty in 1951. When the Chinese attempted to arrest the Dalai Lama in 1959, a country-wide revolt broke out but was crushed. The Dalai Lama fled to India, followed by close to 100,000 of his countrymen who eventually settled in India and Nepal. There were further uprisings against the Chinese during the '60s. According to the filmmakers, two million Tibetans (out of a total population of six million) were killed in the struggle against the Chinese—another 1,270,000 have died in concentration camps since the occupation. In 1961, the Communist regime in Tibet was charged with genocide by the International Commission of Jurists at Geneva. Of 7000 Tibetan monasteries, half a dozen have survived—in part. All were plundered, then later dynamited during the Cultural Revolution.

The *Trilogy* was funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain and has been enthusiastically reviewed in Europe. Apparently the sole dissenting voice is that of Derek Malcolm, critic of *The Guardian* (London) who found that the film "... covers up a multitude of sins, such as the kind of reactionary spirituality that has for centuries left three-quarters of Tibet's population in backwardness and poverty."

A Prophecy, the hour-long first section (the entire work runs four hours), attempts to defuse such charges. We learn that each Tibetan in India now owns an acre of the land offered by the Indian government; children, unless they are to become monks, receive a secular education (formerly, an estimated one-quarter of the entire male population of Tibet entered the priesthood); there are carpet cooperatives. The Dalai Lama appears to be essaying a new blend of Gandhian, socialist, and democratic ideologies. In a discourse on the anniversary of the 1959 uprising against the Chinese, he remarks, "The future will lead to the rule of the masses. When we look at it from this point of view, the invasion has been something good for Tibetans—providing we can follow the right path to the future."

The strongest scene in this section is of monks debating metaphysics, arguing ways to eliminate the ego. These metaphysical debates become vigorously physical, almost rowdy—it all looks a bit like a kung-fu warm-up session.

Part Two, *The Fields of the Senses*, shot in Kashmir, juxtaposes a day in the life of farmers with the ritual activities of the monks. A cremation ceremony is shown. Some scenes are mesmerizing, others soporiferous. One is jolted back to attention by the near-surreal imagery of the chanted texts: "The half moons are my sperm... behold the crocodile heads with necklaces hanging from their mouths."

The film really comes into its own with *Radiating the Fruit of Truth*, the extraordinary two-hour final section, shot in Nepal at a monastery in Bodhnath, near Katmandu. (I'll play demon's advocate to the extent of noting that my Nagel's Guide to Nepal states that the Dalai Lama's representative in Nepal, Chay Lama, is "always ready to pose for photographs at Bodhnath. His conversation is more concerned with financial matters [dollars] than with spiritual considerations.")

Fruit of Truth is an intense, detailed record of the preparations for, and then the enactment of a *Tara puja*—the ritual of "A Beautiful Ornament." This is a great yearly prayer (it lasts all night) to Tara, a savior goddess of wisdom and mercy, similar to the Chinese Kwan Yin.

There are stunning tableaux on the making of the "Cosmogram," a lovely model of the universe. The ensuing ritual is an awesome study of unforgettable faces, eyes, and hands, set against dimly lit harmonies—the reds and yellows of the monks' robes, accompanied by the haunting, penetrating, wailing, thumping, and clanging cacophony of long horns, cymbals, drums, and bells. A marvelous music.

This last section is so riveting it requires an effort to lower eyes from images in order to read the subtitled translation of the mantras. They are worth the effort: "Tara, the quick one, the Heroine, soothe nightmares and ill-favored years, destroy the bad emanations of planets, demons, memory-stealers, be they masculine or feminine, polluters, power-hunters, rulers. Overwhelm the actions of bad harvests, of the 80,000 families of poisonous conglomerates. May all the Lords and Queens of Karmic reaction be satisfied—protect me, Tara, from the great conglomerates of badness, from all young hungry demons, and turn back the 360 malignant conglomerates."

The *Trilogy's* first two sections are of more than passing interest; *Radiating the Fruit of Truth* is a very special and demanding masterpiece, a perfect antidote to the ephemeral twaddle polluting most of this country's screens in 1984. At its close, I found myself in the rain on Vandam Street, muttering: "Tara, the heroine, preserve us from the *Streets of Fire*, protect us from *The Temple of Doom*, overwhelm them and *Gremlins* and the malignant conglomerates which have spawned them." ■