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Unmistaken Child

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A Review of *Unmistaken Child*

Jason Ellsworth¹

Unmistaken Child. DVD. Directed by Nati Baratz. New York, NY: Oscilloscope Pictures 2009.

It has been twenty years since the release of Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam's *The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche* (1991), the documentary film that inspired both Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993) and Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997). While today the politics surrounding the Dalai Lama and Tibet's freedom continue to garner most of the spotlight on the world stage, Israeli director Nati Baratz, has created a film that reminds us of the enduring bond between master and student within Tibetan Buddhism. *Unmistaken Child* is not simply a story of reincarnation. The film chronicles death, bereavement, and one person's struggle to find meaning when the ties of religious devotion become strained.

The film documents Tenzin Zopa on his search for the reincarnation of his late master, Geshe Lama Konchog, who passed away in 2001 at the age of 84. Zopa, a disciple of Lama Konchog since the age of seven, finds himself alone and filled with the anxiety that his charge, to find his master's reincarnation, will not be realized. Packing Lama Konchog's prayer beads and other belongings, which will help locate and identify the lost master, Zopa heads out on a journey that takes him through the villages, mountains and valleys of Tibet and Nepal. Zopa is led forward, discerning signs from patterns in a cremation pyre, observing the drift of cremation smoke, divining with relics, and following the advice of an astrologer from the Heruka Centre in Taiwan.

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He travels by foot, mule and even helicopter, traversing the Nepalese landscape of the remote Himalayas leading to the Tsum Valley where the master has supposedly returned (a place of significance to both Zopa and Lama Konchog).

Finding a boy in the Tsum Valley who has an affinity for Lama Konchog's prayer beads and regularly waters an apple tree that the lama himself once planted, Zopa believes he may have found his master's incarnation. Here the film introduces us to a small child, raised in rural community and depicts his accent through the intricate complex of the monastic world. Baratz explained in an interview with PBS that the story is not so much about the phenomena of reincarnation.

For me, the story is less about reincarnation than about Tenzin and his amazing story of maturation. For 21 years, the young monk never left his master's side. During the movie, Tenzin goes from servant to spiritual leader, eventually bringing the treasure back to the Tibetans. ("Unmistaken")

Murray Smith's theories on character engagement explain well what Baratz attempts to convey. Specifically, two elements of Smith's theory explain how film creates a viewpoint from where the observer becomes aligned with specific characters. First, an allegiance is built between the viewer and the characters onscreen. Next, through this allegiance, the viewer constructs an intricate network of emotional ties to the film's characters, plotlines, and to the abstract concept of the film itself. Smith's theory helps us understand the importance of Baratz's vision, which shapes the emotional direction of the film and explains the visceral impact of the work.

In *Unmistaken Child*, the viewer is drawn in and aligned with Zopa and it is here that our sympathies and allegiances lie. While the student teacher relationship is central to the plot, Zopa is the central focus of the film. In him we find a man who is obedient to his elders and

demonstrates unflagging emotional strength in the face of overwhelming grief. Yet behind closed doors, and luckily for us on the screen, a deeper narrative unfolds. In these cloistered spaces we witness a desperate monk who breaks down crying while in his master's retreat. We see Zopa as a man who displays incredible humility, believing that he does not have the power to take on the monumental endeavours he faces. The sincerity and richness of character, which Zopa exhibits, draw viewers inexorably deeper into his life.

While the director “felt that Tenzin is an amazing character, and that his physical and emotional quest has mythical qualities,” (“Unmistaken”) one cannot ignore the social aspects and social structures surrounding death that come through in the master-student relationship in this film. In his studies on death, Clive Seale observes:

Maintenance of a human social bond is a fundamental motive for social participation, reflected both in large-scale ritual events and the micro-rituals of everyday interaction, where minor currents of exclusion and inclusion underlie the smallest conversational exchange, generating feelings of pride and shame in the flux and flow of membership negotiations. (2)

Throughout this film the viewer is exposed to multiple rituals including tests to reaffirm the rebirth, the identification of the master's objects, various naming ceremonies, and various funerary rites. Through these rituals the social bonds Seale describes are both reaffirmed and newly constructed.

While scholars may want to analyse Tibetan Buddhist forms of ritual praxis, theories on death and rebirth, or approaches to bereavement and character development within a documentary such as this, another area ripe for discourse is the post-documentary life of monks in film. For example, blogs have become a common form of expressing oneself online and shortly before the release of the film, two

were created, one for Zopa (<http://www.geshezopa.blogspot.com>) and one for Tenzin Phuntsok (<http://phuntsokrinpoche.blogspot.com>). The film appears to have been highly effective in creating a stage for these monks that will carry their activities and message through the online blogosphere. A search into the effects that documentaries have on those being filmed or how they live their lives in Tibet after the production of such documentaries may be a point of interest for scholars in the future.

References

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