

“Farewell My Concubine” (Chen Kaige) – “Mothers” (Milcho Manchevski)

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Film makers tell stories with a point of view, theirs. In doing so they have almost full latitude as to the type of narrative that they want to use. From Manchevski’s episodic choice in “Mothers”, void of linearity and exploring the notions of truth and fiction with an emphasis on feeling and emotional stages (that of the characters and that of the viewers); to Kaige’s true epic that unfolds in a more traditional manner but also seeks to explore the human psyche on the backdrop of world history in the making.

“Farewell My Concubine” spans from 1925 through 1977 while “Mothers” is a dramatized depiction of contemporary Macedonia. The first unfolds as time passes and we follow the lives (from childhood to adulthood) of two principal characters, Dieyi and Xiaolou who meet as young boys in a Chinese opera school that makes a Dickensian orphanage look like summer camp. The backdrop of the opera is important for many reasons: The title of the movie comes from a favorite work in Chinese opera repertory, and recount the tale of a concubine who, loyal and true to her king until the end as he faces military defeat, chooses to dance for him one last time before cutting her throat with his sword. That piece is the central engine of the lives of both Dieyi and Xiaolou as it deeply shaped Dieyi’s emotional and sexual development during his childhood, before making stars of the two actors who become known for their performance of that story. While the adult Xiaolou enjoys the Epicurean side of the life that his star status allows him to afford, Dieyi, who plays the concubine and was trained from adolescence to think of himself as a woman, seems to be unable to adjust to life outside the stage. The myth he replays every time they perform that opera has absorbed his entire persona, he is in a state of emotional “arrested development” and seems unable, or unwilling, to accept the dichotomy of life on stage and away from it. That frozen emotional state contrasts vividly with the seemingly constant changes in their environment: from the Sino-Japanese war all the way through Mao’s implacable cultural revolution. As Dieyi constantly struggles in his understanding of what being human is, his country is in constant struggle to try to define itself too, creating both a parallel and a contrast between the two, China and Dieyi. In his own way, he is loyal to the end to his first and only love Xiaolou, allowing the myth he interprets on stage to one more time become reality. As in the story of the king and his concubine, in the end each of us must accept responsibility for one’s own fate.

By contrast Manchevski chose a radically different type of story telling in “Mothers”. Using a 3 parts fold, where each story stand on its own and is seemingly unrelated to the two others, if for the fact that they all deal with truth and fiction and how those two elements shape our lives. “ I felt that the three stories of this film attracted each other to be in the same film” (Milcho Manchevski). It is therefore more of a thematic connection that exists between the three parts: shifting allegiances and setups, victims and perpetrators, and the nature of truth.

“ There’s sort of a betrayal in all three stories. On the other hand, to me what was more important was that all three stories have similar taste. Taste that grows from the first into the second into the third story as it gets stronger, bigger, darker...” (Milcho Manchevski). Just as Kaige was exploring emotions in an unstable world, Manchevski seems to also be driven by

this major part of being a human being: the ability to feel emotions. The human race often suffers of the “Cogito ergo sum” complex, just because our distant ancestors were able to master fire and much later invent the wheel, doesn’t make us into reasonable, rational beings. Yes we think, but our thoughts are more often than not clouded by our emotional states. Those same emotional states are the reason the two little girls make up the story of the flasher. Emotional attachment to the idea of the Present being a continuation of the Past leads the three documentary makers into areas they would not have visited otherwise. As for the third part, it deals with the emotions of a whole community when confronted with a terrible, self inflicted (as the perpetrator is a member of the village) tragedy.

Both Kaige and Manchevski speak with very different voices, but they both share the same common quest. Fully understanding that, despite our misguided belief that we are reasonable creatures, we are primarily emotional beings at our core; they are both interested in trying to understand the scope and power of those feelings.

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