The balance between picaresque comedy and sociological documentary

Shyamal Uncle Turns off the Lights

2012 | Suman GHOSH | 85min | India | Color | Digi Beta
A Window on Asian Cinema

Synopsis

One morning, an old man is going to a grocery store to buy a little milk and on his way there, he finds that the streetlights are still on even after the sunrise. Uncle Shyamal is in his 80's and he leads a perfectly controlled life, complains a little often and is terrible strict for habits. Even if his wife reprimands him, he doesn't hesitate to wake up all his neighbors very early in the morning to listen to news from everyone on the phone. This is the head of a family and his life seems to be composed of things to do, rigor and responsibilities. When he finds that the streetlights are still on without any reason, this rigid old man is enraged. He will engage in a crazy battle to try to have these streetlights turned off.

The story of Shyamal Uncle Turns off the Lights is remarkably simple. The story is told by means of a Kafka-style plot, putting Uncle Shyamal in a hell of public administration with his absurd logic, his aberrant hidden temper and his lack of humanity. What appears as a detail with little interest for most of the residents of the area (who strongly make of the fact that the streetlights are still on and who consider the old man a crazy man) becomes for Uncle Shyamal a question of life or death. The film thus rapidly takes a tone of a failure to making the protagonist's combat a symbol of political, civic and citizens' fight. Through the endless coming and goings of Uncle Shyamal taken by the city's different people in charge (city councilors, deputy mayors, police officers, maintenance workers, public servants of the power plant...), it is an ironic and strange picture of contemporary Indian society drawn by the director.

Suman Ghosh's style is very simple. Filmed in long sequences on the shoulder on the city streets, almost without any music, Shyamal Uncle Turns off the Lights is close to an aesthetic documentary with his high-definition image which is extremely clear and realist. Such purity of mise en scene passes through multiple effects of reality that are very impressive, like the multiple scenes in which the passersby directly look at the camera. In this way, they give an impression that the film is a pure capture of life as what it is, a life which is crowded and chaotic, in a populated area. However, nothing is improvised in Suman Ghosh's film. The impeccable rhythm and the art with which the director deals with new twists of the "accidents" of the plot invite the audience to understand that a true epic is told in the small adventure which looks ordinary which goes on before their eyes.

The film refreshes its Kafka-style small mechanical structure, which is composed of encounters and always postponed meetings (as if the protagonist were in the middle of a video game composed of an unlimited number of levels), with its taste of reality. Following the old man during his long and complex odyssey, the director provides the street with a rhythm of people's lives that never forgets to remain on the side of light tone and satirical spirit which keep the whole film from flowing into a spirit of unacceptable and exaggerated seriousness. It is this great balance between urban picaresque comedy, sociological documentary and citizens' militarism that provides Shyamal Uncle Turns off the Lights with its attracting power.

The way of following the protagonist step by step generates energy and veracity that inevitably remind the audience of great Iranian of the 80's and 90's and in particular, a film like Where is the Friend's Home? directed by Abbas Kiarostami. Suman Ghosh had the extraordinary idea of taking this tradition of citizens' story again (returning to the old question: "how to learn to live together?"), by replacing the theme of youth in Iranian films with this stubborn and combative old man who reminds the audience of how much wisdom still hold a key to solve so many problems linked to excessive acculturation of traditional societies attacked by modernity. The protagonist, interpreted by the extraordinary actor Shyamal Bhattacharya, shows an almost childlike aspect in his combat of the old man who is a little fanatical and who can forget about all his family and personal problems to solve a problem of public nature.

Suman Ghosh invites us to a world of cinema which is quite far from the lights and techniques of Bollywood. Nevertheless, we must not believe that the access to Shyamal Uncle Turns off the Lights is reserved to the most difficult viewers. The extraordinary magic generated from the last part, when the old man wakes up as in its first morning, at dawn, in a street still asleep, belongs to a fairy tale and leads to one of the most beautiful "happy ending" that we have seen ever before. The true history on which the film is based thus takes enchanting effects, at the end of this combat full of dignity, anger and enmagement.

Vincent MALAUZA (Cahiers du cinéma)