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Response Paper “The Dragon Painter”

The Dragon Painter by William Worthington (1919) is a silent movie based on the same name story written by Mary McNeil Fenollosa. In this film, the director aims to show his audience the Oriental culture that was free from stereotypes while telling the story of a young painter in search of his charmed princess. There is an impression that he did not fully achieve his plan because some aspects of the Japanese lifestyle were distorted.

As it is known in history, Japan has always been isolated from the influence of the outer world until the middle of the 19th century. It is hard to imagine that a country could preserve its authentic identity in an interdependent world. Perhaps it is why Japanese culture is so exotic to the rest of the world, and many people are convinced that it has unique traditions. However, right after discovering Japan, there was a general atmosphere of prejudice towards the country. The negative assumption motivated Worthington to make a motion picture which would destroy all the stereotypes about Japanese people and their culture.

As previously mentioned, the director's work was controversial. A lot of movie critics did negative reviews about this film saying that it was far from reality and did not portray Japan the way it is. In particular, the Japanese were unsatisfied with the choice of names and scenery; they expressed discontent with the general spirit of the movie. Also, Ume-ko's suicide so that Tatsu may regain his talent and paint again was a common Hollywood stereotype about Asian women which is prevalent nowadays.

The plot is very simple yet poetic and beautiful. William Worthington did not need to complicate it to show the story of the protagonist. The film consists of several tense moments which are very predictable. The simplicity of the plot does not make the movie seem like penny-a-line; it allows the director to make an emphasis on the emotions of the characters.

Likewise, Yosemite Valley as the main scenery of the movie is a perfect place for The Dragon Painter to be obsessed by the search for his charmed princess. One of the main ideas of the story was to demonstrate how much Japanese people admire and love nature which is one of the most important features of their culture. Not so many motion pictures show us such dedication to beauty and aesthetics. Worthington tries to blur the boundaries between the civilization and wilderness as it is in the Japanese culture. However, in Eurocentric lifestyle nature and progress are two different sides of a human's environment. The opening shot of Hakawa mountains depicts Japan as a wild and an astonishing place.

It appears that Ume-ko was more authentic as a Japanese character than her husband. She symbolizes a Japanese woman who lives in a typical country house with a garden, near a river, sliding doors ornamented with paintings,

stones, and paper lanterns. She is always dressed up in a luxurious kimono and has perfect manners. Her opposite is the Dragon Painter who has no house (he sleeps in the woods), wears torn clothes, has messy hair and is extremely impolite from time to time, showing that the only thing that matters to him is the search for his loved one.

Speaking about Tatsu, it is necessary to note that he looks like a very lopsided character. He has no interests except the enchanted princess and is separated from the outer world and other people. Perhaps the director intended to emphasize the basic idea of the movie by the curtailment of unnecessary details. We do not know where he comes from, how he got the money to buy the paper and ink or how the idea of the never-ending search for his love got into the painter's mind. None of that is known, and the protagonist seems to be more like a madman than an obsessed genius. The only thing we can be sure about is that "it's Tatsu, the "Dragon Painter." He says he seeks an enchanted princess, whom the spirits took from him, and he paints strange pictures" (Worthington, 1919).

Also, the main character lacks the traditional Japanese spirit. His manners and behavior are too western-style and exaggerated. Most representatives of Japan are tranquil and self-centered (in a good way). However, Tatsu sometimes is too passionate, unrestrained and uncultured which makes it hard to believe in his authenticity.

There are few of the most valuable and inspiring styles of art in *The Dragon Painter* movie. The first one is the opening scene which is different from the original novel. In the film, the whole story begins in Hakawa mountains instead of Tokyo. The director's idea was to draw the audience's attention to

one of the cornerstones of Japanese culture, the belief that humankind and nature are an ensemble.

The second one is the unique dedication and commitment of Tatsu; he never stopped chasing his dream. It is clear that the single wish to be reunited with his love became a source of such genius actions, and the more he was missing his princess, the more gifted he was.

Thus, *The Dragon Painter* is an outstanding movie, an attempt to depict Japanese culture in an Orientalism style which was popular in the United States back then. It shows us typical Japanese characters – an artist and a woman who sacrificed herself, but in a very innovative and unusual way. They no longer seem to be incomprehensible and strange to the western audience, but they prove that Japan is more than kimonos, sakuras, and the ancient traditions. Their culture is full of wonders and is an example we have to follow.