

AND THERE IS MORE TO COME

Sherman Ong | filmmaker

I am going to tell this story in chronologically reverse order. So I will not start with the first time I saw this nice short film Exodus, but I will start with a movie that might still be in the making.

I have known Sherman One for some time, but recently we went on adventures together and got to know each other better. So I will not write Ong or Sherman Ong, but Sherman, since otherwise it would sound very strange for me.

We went to Africa together, but most recently to China, in the company of a number of African filmmakers. So we found ourselves in the nice warm summer days of July 2010 in Songzhuang, an artist and farmers community in the very outskirts of Beijing.

The Africans were there because of a kind of workshop project I organised for the Rotterdam film festival. I had asked Sherman to be a mentor to one of them, to help out with the filmmaking and also with the language. Sherman came to China for the first time, but he clearly has old Chinese roots, and found himself at home quite quickly. He also turned out to be an ideal and beloved mentor so I asked him to stay longer and to also help other African filmmakers.

Sherman was well-liked as a mentor for many reasons, but one of them reveals much about his own filmmaking. He can leave his pupils alone, but they can call him when they need him; when he is not engaged in mentoring, he is also able to step aside to do his own 'thing'. So when an African filmmaker was shooting, you could see Sherman a short distance away making his own shots.

I am not a technically gifted photographer like Sherman, but I made some pictures that show how he worked at making his own images in China while his African filmmakers were doing their own thing.

The first picture shows just that. Sherman had been showing Ugandan filmmaker Xenson (Samson Ssenkaaba) around Beijing and the surroundings of Songzhuang and every now and again, Sherman would take out his camera and shoot for a few minutes. Mostly about two minutes, he tells me. Maybe for some people it is a little too long, but for him, in an intuitive way, just right.

Sometimes I looked over his shoulder when he made a shot like that, as you can see in the second picture. While his filmmaker Xenson was chasing goose to have a more lively shot of a pond outside Songzhuang (because of the construction activities there are countless artificial ponds like this in China, somehow all full of fish), Sherman opted for an image as quiet as possible.

The red dot in the upper right corner proves that he is recording and not just making a photograph. The camera will not move however and somehow I think an image like this stays in a nice, almost painterly way, close to photography. It moves so we will have to call it film.

Images such as this one might end up later in films or installations, I am told, but I sense that he already had a kind of framework for them in his mind. Anyway I was happy to be able to see how relaxed this productive filmmaker found and made his images.

Seizing the opportunity, improvising, always bringing your camera and looking away from the obvious can bring a small budget far. Here is a last picture from China, just to show that even a worn out tourist attraction like the Great Wall can function as an object for a voyeur with another eye. It functions as a tripod as well!

I had good reasons to ask Sherman for the project with the African filmmakers in China. The year before that we went to Africa together to make a movie and to meet local filmmakers. So we met in Dar es Salaam, the capitol of Tanzania. Due to my itinerary, I had more filmmakers and countries in my project, as such we could not spend too much time together. It was however enough to get an impression of his relaxed, yet very organized way of working. The budget for this project was very small, so he decided not to stay in the hotel that I stayed in, that by any standard was very modest. We walked around in the neighbourhood till we found a small backpackers place that felt good and had a price that made it possible for Sherman to stay longer. Later I would realize why he needed his time.



Ugandan artist/filmmaker Xenson and mentor Sherman filming the Wen Yue river in fog outside Beijing



Sherman Ong's 5D Running a Landscape



Two minutes of Great Wall

video installations. Those shots created room for people to talk like they where sitting in a booth of their own, almost out of reach of the director. But it was the director who put them there in the first place and before they sat down he would have given them instructions. Hashi would be followed by the self-assured film Flooding in a Time of Drought and Memories of a Burning Tree, but it is remarkable how already self-assured this small low budget film is. To understand this one should realise that when Sherman made his first feature he had already made quite a number of short films and had also already presented his photographic work in exhibitions. So he was not really a newcomer.

Back to Exodus, the short dance movie made in 2003. It was the first of Sherman's films I saw and that I showed in my festival, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, in 2004. I found it a very special movie and when I watch it again now I guess I understand why I thought that. The film partly gives an impression of traditional Indonesian art as we know it. Keep in mind that I am Dutch and got my share of Indonesian culture from colonial times. On the other hand it gives elements that are in opposition with the traditional elegance. It shows a lively railway crossing where the poor of Jakarta pass by in the thousands. And it shows some dressing room scenes that have a remarkable sexual ambiguity and gender confusion. Scenes full of passions you do not associate with traditional dance as is the case with the social documentary elements.

When I saw the film I had never been to Southeast Asia, but it was through films like this that I decided to travel the region extensively in the years after that. It would make me some sort of expert in Southeast Asian cinema.

Exodus is not Sherman's only dance movie. In fact he is somehow a specialist in the genre. He made a number of them, also quite recently. Maybe his preoccupation with dance, with working with a theatre that does not speak, has no dialogues, is telling us something about his way of working in his long foreign language feature films. Apparently he is so used to work with a group of actors that expresses themselves not, first and foremost, with words that he is able to use this method also with actors who speak a language he cannot understand.

There are reasons why Sherman can make the movies he makes. Some are more obvious. To make his movies in Africa, in Japan, in Indonesia and even in Singapore on very low budgets and with the visual quality he aims for you need to do a lot yourself (so he is his own director of photography) and you need the help of friends. If you do not have friends in Africa or Japan yet you need to make them and in order to make them you need to be a bright and kind and very nice person. So that is how he makes his films, by making friends. I am happy and honored that one day he decided that it was a good idea that I would be one of his friends. That was a nice idea. So I could enjoy his films and his filmmaking even more.

Sherman looked for and found local young actors and artists in Dar es Salaam who were willing to participate in his adventure. Professional film actors are hard to find in Tanzania, so he trained his new friends how to play roles in the movie he had in mind. In a very nice scene in the final movie you see how his actors rehearse on a rooftop terrace and enthusiastically engage in trying basic theatre acting techniques. With this, the movie reveals how it is made.

The budget was barely enough for a short film, but Memories of a Burning Tree, his Tanzanian movie, is a feature length film full of light and precious moments. I am biased of course because of my involvement, but for me it is Sherman's best film.

I showed his previous movie Flooding in the Time of Drought as a long feature film (and with more than three hours indeed a long film), but it was originally made as a video installation for the Singapore Biennale. I never saw it as an installation, but I can imagine that the movie can work like that or maybe even work better like that.

Anyway I guess it is about the film as I know it and about how it works like that. Maybe when I would have seen it as an installation I could have written that it might better work as a film. The different characters and locations in Singapore of the film should add up, you should not randomly pass them, but you should see how one after the other brings something more to a very general story about immigration and living as a foreigner in a country that loves restrictions. The film shows the inside and the life in those many high-rise apartment buildings that dominate blooming Asian cities like Singapore. The film has a very general if not universal idea (about the future of immigration and the environment), but it tells this story in a detailed, personal and concrete way. As it is so often with Sherman the film is about the people who could be your neighbours. The neighbours you never speak to because they speak another language. But Sherman says hello with his eyes and we should follow him.

Memories of a Burning Tree was for a large part made with African actors who speak a language that the filmmaker did not understand. A risky way of working because by the time you find out in the editing room with the help of a translator what really was said there is little that can be done when something in the dialogue is wrong or silly. Sherman took this risk before so he knew what was coming. His first feature length film Hashi (2008) was shot in Japan during a residency offered by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Hashi is a fiction film with a lot of dialogue and it is totally in Japanese. You could call it a Japanese movie. The film contains a lot of intimate talking scenes and you wonder how it was possible to direct a movie like that by a director who does not speak the language. The film is very visual and has sometimes quite long fixed frames. Not the poetic long shots of Asian art house cinema, but the persistent shots of

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