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THE TAO

in

WOMAN IN THE DUNES

by Dennis Giles

WOMAN IN THE DUNES (*Suna No Onna*), directed by Hiroshi Tesigahara and adapted by Kobe Abe from his own novel, seems most readily accessible as an expression of an ancient Chinese philosophy known as taoism. The ancient Chinese symbol of tao consists of 道, road, 首, head of a leader, 足, foot (follower). Tao is the path, the process, the way that a man follows, that all things follow. When a man follows this path he is said to be "in the tao," or in the natural order of things. The tao can be called the path of least resistance. To be in harmony with, not in rebellion against, the fundamental laws of the universe is the first step on the road to tao. Tao, like water, takes the low-ground. Water has become, perhaps, the most popular taoist symbol. The symbolic value of water is also one of the most striking elements in *Woman in the Dunes*. The low-ground to which the tao flows is usually a valley or a pit. Since water flows into these natural depressions, the valley becomes the real as well as the symbolic "dwelling place of the tao." The yielding nature of water is a feminine characteristic, and concave surfaces are also female in nature. Thus the valley, the pit, and the tao are all feminine. The yielding nature of water is called the "Mysterious Female." "It is there within us all the while; draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry." The valleys are nearer to tao than the hills; and in the whole of creation it is the negative, passive, female element alone that has access to tao, which can only be mirrored "in a still pool." Stillness (ho p'ing) and non-action (wu-wei) are necessary in order to be in the tao. Only by remaining passive, receptive, and yielding can the tao assert itself in the mind.

When we first meet the entomologist guest in *Woman in the Dunes*, he is trudging over dry, un-tao like *hills* of sand. When he rests, a stillness settles over the landscape. Then the entomologist receives a hallucination (or an inspiration) of a woman— the taoist element first asserts itself. As is its character, this tao-female image yields to the harder,

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more concrete images of the village men, the hairy creatures who are the entomologist's guides and betrayers. It is only natural that they should betray, according to the taoist interpretation, because they are masculine. Being masculine they are not in the tao and are thus false in character. Anything that is non-tao is not true because only the tao is true reality. All other phenomena are deceptive. The tao never initiates, but grows out of itself like a child grows in a woman—like the child grows inside of the lonely widow in the picture (Kyoko Kishida). Although the entomologist is masculine, there is still hope for him. The actor, Eiji Okada, possesses a passive kind of handsomeness, the same blandness he possessed as the architect of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Within

this blandness lies the potential for taoist non-action to assert itself. Furthermore, the entomologist is an insect collector. Insects follow the tao because they don't think. Their actions are spontaneous; and the essence of the tao is spontaneity. However, the essence of entomology, of all science, is classification and logical order. The tao is not reached by logical thought, but by intuition. Thus the entomologist cannot climb out of the pit by scientifically using the natural slope of the sand. When he finally escapes by scientific means, his flight leads only to



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a pit of quicksand. When he discovers water it is not by logical thought but by accident. The scientific impulse of measurement and classification has nothing in common with the tao. The first principle of taoism is the relativity of all attributes, that Tokyo is no better than the pit-village. Nothing is in itself long or short. But the entomologist has made science his life, and he is proud of the impending recognition of his discoveries. He does not realize that fame is also relative. When he throws away his insect collection it is a great step forward.

The entomologist's male escorts lead him to the pit, "the dwelling place of the tao." It is inhabited by a woman. Her femininity is a count in her favor. She is already more in the tao than her guest, and she lives in a pit. However, the pit is dry. Water has to be imported by the villagers, until the guest discovers water by accident. Then the pit, indeed, becomes "the valley of the mysterious female," complete with water and a pregnant woman. Significantly, the guest's discovery of water comes at a time when he is indeed "in the tao," when he has abandoned his desire for fame and escape.

The guest first yields by descending into the pit. It does not matter if he has been tricked; one can reach the tao only by complete accept-

ance of the unknown. On the way to the tao you can never know what you are getting into until you have reached it. When Okada reaches the bottom of the pit, the woman prepares his dinner, as is her function, then takes off her clothes and goes to sleep. She behaves with disarming naturalness. She later explains that sleeping nude is only yielding to the nature of things. Naked sleep is the path of least resistance—wearing clothes to bed is useless for it will result only in skin rash. However, she does not speak immediately, but lets the guest learn for himself. There is a taoist saying, "Those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak."

In the morning, the guest arises to find the ladder gone. Then he starts his rebellion which will last through most of the film. He tries to climb the walls of the pit—a futile action. The sand only follows its nature and collapses on top of him. All escape is futile—only non-action (wu-wei) brings salvation. After hours of futility, the entomologist goes to his hostess; she tells her guest that he is now a permanent fixture of her pit. It is only natural that he should live with her, because she is a lonely woman who needs love, and the sand needs to be dug out of the pit. He should follow the path of the least resistance (tao) and accept his new position. She must dig in order to save the village. They need her and she needs them. It is a dynamic balance, the balance of the taoist yin/yang—the dual principle of the universe necessary to maintain the order of the village, which is also the order of the world. For nothing exists independently, but each part is dependent upon the whole made of other parts. Thus we have the taoist images of lions and insects. The lion with all his hairs is at the same time found within a single hair—unity within multiplicity. The lion would not exist without his hairs. The lion hairs would not exist without the lion. The many combines into one as in the unified motion of centipede's legs—a conspicuous image at the start of *Woman in the Dunes*. The widow points out that hers is not the only house in a pit. Everyone must work in order to keep the whole alive. The sand is not particular as to where it falls; neither is she particular, but accepts whatever man falls into her pit. They must shovel out the sand slowly. Hurry is disastrous for there is no goal to be conceived. She will dig out the sand, and it will fall back in. It is a senseless life with no goals, an aimless life. But the tao is aimless and illogical. Digging sand out of a sand pit is the perfect example of wu-wei—purposeless non-action. The woman teaches the man to shovel sand, paraphrasing two more taoist sayings, "Be still while you walk, and keep full control over all." "Much talk means much exhaustion."

The guest refuses to accept the path of the least resistance and ties up the woman, a futile action entirely contrary to the tao. "Violence leads nowhere." The entomologist is dehydrating himself, removing himself further and further from that essential moisture (tao) necessary for life. When no sand is dug, no rations arrive. The guest can either do what he is supposed to do, or die of thirst. Finally, the guest yields; he releases the woman and makes love to her, following nature. In the evening they dig sand. Water arrives. The tao has been followed and

brings its rewards—more tao—both woman and water.

Still, Okada does not completely accept his new way of life, but clings to his “outside” life as surely as he clings to his flasks, his camera, his watch, his insect collection, and his Western clothing. He still longs to escape and finally does so through cleverness and deceit. Lao-Tzu condemned conventional cleverness as being alien to tao. The guest’s escape is a false one. He has only deceived himself. Randomly running over the countryside, he is followed, but *not chased*, by the villagers with their lanterns. The villagers know that they do not need to catch Okada—that he will catch himself. The unlucky entomologist wanders into quicksand. When he is being sucked under, he rapidly reconciles himself to circumstances and calls upon the villagers for help. This is the second time that he has followed the path of the least resistance, but only because he will die if he does not. He has yet to willingly accept his position. Okada has made only the first step on the road to tao.

Once in the pit again, a sense of the futility of all action is realized by the entomologist as he follows the yielding path of non-action (wu-wei) and reconciles himself to his position. He assumes a more comfortable dress compatible with his environment. He admits that his hope of rescue is a faint one. Finally he throws away his insect collection. His reward is his unintentional discovery of water. His scientific method of climbing out of the pit ended in failure. The tao only reveals itself slowly and cannot be forced; the water slowly and inscrutably rises in the crow pit. The sand itself is a “natural pump” and draws the water to it. The dryness of the sand attracts the moisture—the yin/yang principle at work.

But still the guest-husband is not content. He desires even more water, even more tao. He wants to see the ocean, which leads him to acquiesce to the male villager’s demand of the presentation of a sexual show. But the tao does not exist for anyone or anything outside of itself, but is self-sufficient in itself, much like autonomous art. Realizing that natural processes cannot be hurried, that good (taoist) relationships grow slowly out of their potential, the female rebels against the brutality and unnaturalness of that which is not tao. The tao operates in secret and should remain a mystery. The villagers leave unsatisfied.

Unhappily, Hiroshi Teshigahara himself distances the spectator and kills belief with his brutal presentation of the masked villagers’ demand for public sexual intercourse between the woman and her husband-guest. The spectator is totally unprepared for this event and Teshigahara’s shock technique does not succeed despite its purposeful exploitation of cinema’s hypnotic possibilities. There is no motivation for the actions of the villagers and the whole sequence is extremely distasteful and serves no purpose whatsoever, except to gain sympathy for the characters immediately concerned. Even in this it fails; because the entomologist himself becomes merely pathetic or even repulsive. Viewed in long shot, the insect collector is viewed as an insect. Why distance the main character in a movie where identification with this character is necessary for the success of the film? Due largely to this unhappy sequence, it



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is hard to understand Okada’s reasons for his actions at the end of the film. It is not enough to say with Lao-Tzu that the tao has no why. The tao grows out of itself—action must be motivated—content must grow out of the preceding material. Even in the taoist context the treatment of the masked-voyeurs has no justification.

As the tao grows out of itself, so the water forms in the hole, so the child forms in the womb of the woman. Yet for the first time, the widow rebels against her fate. When the guest-husband sends for the villagers to take her to the hospital, she does not want to go. The baby is clearly premature, but after the woman leaves, the guest sees a little boy at the top of the pit. The stare of this little boy seems to indicate a healthy birth. The villagers leave the rope ladder for the guest because they know he will not leave. Okada climbs the ladder and walks to the sea. After contemplating the calmness of this great expanse of tao, he willingly returns to the pit. He goes to look at the water-symbol in the hole he has dug. He sees the promise of fertility in the reflection of the child. The tao can only be “mirrored in a still pool.” The guest-husband-father now rests content and happy in his private awareness of his oneness with all things, that he is a part of the whole, that the whole of the tao would not be what it is without him. He is finally “in the tao.” The film ends.

The tao has no why. It just is. The tao has no self-knowledge like western gods; it does not know how it creates the universe. This taoist principle would seem to be against the rules of dramatic art because it would seem to imply that characters need no motivation for their actions, that actions happen just because they exist. This is not necessarily

true. Because the tao creates itself and grows out of itself, every piece of the taoist film is a growth of the potential of the preceding segment. Thus motivation must grow out of the content of the film itself. Above all, it must not be imposed on the film. All content must naturally develop out of the preceding content. The motivation of the entomologist—guest of *Woman in the Dunes*, grows naturally out of his situation. Thus belief is maintained through most of the film. Belief is essential to the success of a film based upon such a peculiar situation; otherwise, the film becomes a parable, and we look at its characters much as the entomologist contemplates an insect. In order for the spectator to accept *Woman in the Dunes*, he must actually be in the pit with the guest—he must be the guest. There must be no distancing of the spectator or belief will be destroyed.

With the exception of the aforementioned voyeur sequence, *Woman in the Dunes* fits perfectly in content and form with the principles of taoist art. The film seems to be a taoist Bible explaining how salvation can be achieved.

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Woman in the Dunes