

# The New York Times

## Review: In ‘Tharlo,’ a Shepherd’s Life Upended by a Trip to the City

By GLENN KENNY SEPT. 27, 2016



“Tharlo” begins with its title character, a middle-aged shepherd who has lived practically all of his life atop a Tibetan mountain tending his animals, reciting a speech by Mao Zedong to a local law-enforcement official, who is greatly impressed with the shepherd’s memory. Tharlo, who is nicknamed Ponytail for his long braid, shyly exclaims that he showed prodigious powers of memory in elementary school, where he learned the speech, but had no further opportunities for education.

Written and directed by Pema Tseden, adapting his own novella, “Tharlo” is a character study at a turning point in that character’s life. Obligated to get an official ID card, Tharlo, beautifully played by Shide Nyima, ventures into a nearby city to procure a photograph. Told by the photographer to clean up, he visits a beauty salon where he charms Yangtso (Yang Shik Tso), the young woman who washes his hair. They spend an awkward evening at karaoke, a social activity that Tharlo has never even heard of before. On returning to his flock, he finds himself almost catastrophically distracted, and decides to change his life for good, and include Yangtso in that change.

The movie is shot in black and white, in often very long takes. The style calls to mind the early films of the American director Jim Jarmusch, but this picture does not emulate Mr. Jarmusch's knowing sardonic tone. "Tharlo" instead opts for fleeting charm and shaggy humanism, until the narrative takes a grim turn that's both trite and sexist. The bottom drops out of the movie, leaving its interest almost exclusively ethnographic.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/28/movies/review-tharlo.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/28/movies/review-tharlo.html?_r=0)

## 'Tharlo': Film Review

2:21 PM PDT 10/4/2016 by Frank Scheck



Courtesy of dGenerate Collection at Icarus Films

**A lonely Tibetan shepherd becomes romantically involved with a sophisticated younger woman in Pema Tseden's acclaimed drama.**

Being a shepherd undoubtedly requires a lot of patience, and so does watching the latest effort from acclaimed Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden (*Old Dog*). Relating the tale of a shepherd whose life changes dramatically when he ventures to the big city and becomes romantically involved with a younger, sophisticated woman, *Tharlo* is meticulously executed, but like many art house films of its type, it's more than a little dull.

The title character (Shide Nyima) lives a quiet, simple life tending to his flock, with a pet lamb being his only company. Although uneducated, he possesses a prodigious memory, as demonstrated by his ability to quote at length from Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, a feat he performs at the drop of a hat.

Notified by the local authorities that he must obtain an official ID card — "I know who I am, isn't that enough?" he complains — Tharlo, more commonly known as "Ponytail" for his trademark hairstyle, ventures into the nearest town. He visits a photographer to get his picture taken, only to be told that he must first get himself cleaned up. He then goes to a hair salon, where he is attended to by the comely Yangchuo (Yang Shik Tso), whose untraditional manner is signified by her short hair and cigarette smoking. She acts flirtatiously, and that night they go out together to a karaoke bar, a form of entertainment that thoroughly befuddles Tharlo.

That the gentle shepherd's life is going to change, and not for the better, upon meeting the free-spirited young woman is not hard to guess. But while the plot developments are predictable, the director imposes an austere style that invests the allegorical proceedings with a fable-like quality. The black & white film is composed of long, static, meticulously composed shots (the press notes claim only 84 in all) that frequently emphasize the central character's feelings of disorientation and dislocation. The sound design also is carefully designed, the loud cacophony of the urban settings dramatically contrasting with the deafening silence of the countryside.

The glacially paced film is ultimately more interesting for its ethnographic and technical aspects than its rudimentary storyline, although the marvelous deadpan performance by Nyima, an acclaimed Tibetan theater performer, provides a much-needed humanistic quality.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/tharlo-review-935029>

# SCREEN DAILY

## 'Tharlo': Review

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2 October, 2015 | By Wendy Ide



**Dir: Pema Tseden. China. 2015. 123mins**

Issues of identity, clashes of culture and the nitty-gritty of sheep-herding are the themes which drive Tibetan director Pema Tseden's beguiling fable *Tharlo*. The eponymous central character, a simple shepherd more used to the derisive moniker 'Ponytail' than he is to his given name, finds the certainties of his austere, isolated existence called into question when he is sent to the nearest town to be photographed for an ID card. This is a slow burning piece of storytelling which moves at the same unhurried, methodical pace as life in the steppes. As such, it requires a certain investment from the audience. However, this is repaid amply by an unassuming but accomplished picture which should connect with an adventurous arthouse audience.

**For the most part, this is a beautifully judged picture from a director to note.**

The film also works on an allegorical level as a commentary on Tibet itself. Tseden shows us a country where deep-rooted traditions and a rich cultural history co-exist uneasily with the encroaching tide of modernity. Tharlo (Shide Nyima) is a man full of contradictions. He has an exceptional memory and can still recite the huge, unwieldy chunks of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* that he learned as a nine-year-old. But he can't remember how old he is – his rough estimate is "past 40,

I guess". In some ways, he has stalled at the point where his scant education stopped and he was sent to work. Morality, for him, is black and white. People are either good or bad.

When he is informed by the local police chief that he must get an ID card, he is bewildered. "I know who I am. Isn't that enough?". But he complies, and with an orphaned lamb in tow, he makes the long journey to the nearest town. The photographer takes issue with his straggly, unwashed hair and sends him across the road to a barbers to be tidied up a little. It's here that he has the fateful encounter that will change the course of his life.

The hairdresser, Yangchuo (Yang Shik Tso) , is a modern young woman. She has cut her hair short, she smokes. Tharlo is slightly scandalised; it's the first time he has seen a Tibetan girl smoke. She lazily toys with Tharlo, tugging his stringy ponytail and calling him handsome. He is lost.

Tseden shoots in striking black and white, using long takes and locked shots which give the audience plenty of time to absorb the admirable work by production designer Daktse Dundrup. But where the film really excels is in its use of sound, supervised by Dukar Tserang.

From the moment that Tharlo gets into town, he is buffeted by noise. There's the constant putter of traffic in the street outside: at least two radios bleeding into each other; the hum of the flies that languidly weave around the shop. It's a stark contrast to the almost oppressive silence of the mountains, punctuated by the occasional yelp of wolves and mournful folk songs that drift from Tharlo's radio, ghostly voices from a long-forgotten past. A scene in a karaoke bar is particularly well-handled. Yangchuo slyly serenades Tharlo with the lyrics, "I am leaving the mountains to go out into the world" while outside their cubicle, the world gets drunk and howls at the night.

Some of the symbolism is a little heavy handed. The lamb, for example, is clearly a metaphor for Tharlo's embattled innocence. So no prizes for guessing how well things work out for the lamb. But for the most part, this is a beautifully judged picture from a director to note.

<http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/tharlo-review/5094966.article>



# Tharlo

BY [DIEGO SEMERENE](#)

SEPTEMBER 27, 2016

Pema Tseden's *Tharlo* bears an improbable, even uncanny, likeness to F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise*. It's not just because of its striking black-and-white cinematography, but for the ways in which Tseden dramatizes the perils of modernity in the simplest of ways. In the Murnau film, a married man is enraptured by the vampy city woman who brings his most sordid drives to the surface. Suddenly a settled life becomes completely unmoored by the possibility of the new. The eponymous man (Pema Tseden) in Tseden's film, a ponytailed sheep herder with a lamb for a pet and a very good memory for reciting Comrade Mao's speeches, is similarly undone by the temptations of a short-haired city girl (Yang Shik Tso), a mermaid of sorts who lures him away from the righteous loneliness of the farm and the discipline of his craft.

While the temptress from *Sunrise* drives the man to consider drowning his own wife, *Tharlo*'s capitulation to the dangers of a woman with a plan and a weak sense of ethics seems as if it can only bring about his own demise and that of his herd. A scene where *Tharlo* gets his hair washed by his siren echoes *Sunrise*'s classic salon sequence, where the wife, now safe from the husband's bout with murderousness, watches him get a fancy hot shave. The wonders, and the most fundamental feature, of Tseden's film lie in the plainness of its narrative, which essentially consists of *Tharlo*'s ultimately Kafkaesque attempts at getting an official ID card made.

The steps to producing such visible and institutional proof of who *Tharlo* is—from getting his hair washed by the temptress so as to look presentable for

the ID card, to paying for it at the local police station—should, presumably, be quick and straightforward. But Tseden, like his main character, soaks in every moment with the boredom-defying curiosity—the fertile patience—of an Abbas Kiarostami or Apichatpong Weerasethakul protagonist.

In the logic of the film, for the camera to move at all would feel like a betrayal of its contemplative hunger.

Throughout, scenes persist, like a tableau, until every possibility for poesis has been extinguished; the steps for Tharlo's ID card to be produced are delayed, providing ample opportunity for him to lose his sense of self in the process. Ingeniously, by the time the card is made, Tharlo, worn-out and now sans ponytail, no longer coincides with the identity the card is meant to represent; the events that followed the taking of the photograph have unsettled him to the point that he no longer resembles his original self.

Tseden's camera is so respectful of the inner drama of his characters, so deferential to their suffering, that it locks itself into place, as if stunned. The camera remains static as Tharlo walks into the photo studio and waits his turn. It stays still as the photographer takes portraits of an impassive couple, ordering her assistant to change the various backgrounds for the photographs; one moment we're in front of the Tiananmen in Beijing, the next in New York City. The camera doesn't dare to move either when the flirty hairdresser who massages Tharlo's skull concocts a plan to profit off of the many sheep that he claims to own. The camera even lingers, dutifully immobile, when Tharlo picks up smoking, when he has a coughing fit, when he snores, when he puts his clothes back on post-coitus.

Uninitiated audiences may be oblivious to nuances that seem important here, such as references to Tibetan girls not normally smoking cigarettes, or wearing their hair short. But the film's visceral message—the frailty of man, so easily unraveled by the deceitful availability of strangers, so perpetually paralyzed by bureaucracy—is undeniably brewing in the slowness of every frame. In the logic of the film, for the camera to move at all would feel like a betrayal of its contemplative hunger, an unsettling indulgence, not unlike the cropping of a painting which could only be grasped through its totality.

<http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/tharlo>



## Review of Pema Tseden's *Tharlo*



Courtesy of Icarus Films

by **Maya Rudolph**

*This review contains spoilers.*

*Tharlo*, Pema Tseden's noir-inflected romance, is a story of identity, a journey of the self in black and white. A Tibetan shepherd known by his eponymous "Ponytail" travels from his rural home to a small city in Qinghai Province in reluctant pursuit of an ID card—the documentation all Chinese rely on to designate their residency. His never-used given name is Tharlo and, though he's easygoing, Ponytail isn't convinced that he needs an ID. "I know who I am," he says plainly. "Isn't that enough?" But it's not enough—at least not for Tseden to set the stakes for Tharlo's journey into the miasma of the city. A conversation of the heaviness of life and death plays out in the bureau office of Chief Dorjie, a friendly Tibetan cop who compliments Tharlo's formidable recitation of Mao's "Serve the People." As the men reflect on the line "To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai," Tharlo tells Dorjie he's confident that his own way of serving the people, tending his flock of sheep, will bring Mount Tai-volume gravity to his death when the time comes.

In the city, Ponytail tries on his urban identity as Tharlo. Accompanied by an orphaned lamb he carries in a satchel, Tharlo waits his turn in a photography studio and watches a couple pose, first against a painted backdrop of Tian'anmen Square and then a boxy, distorted

representation of the New York City skyline. Tseden presents the discrete, static spaces of an urban town through reflections and cropped frames that betray Tharlo's discomfort with the unfamiliar customs of city life. Played with a plainspoken good humor by Tibetan comedian Shide Nyima, Tharlo is a good sport of ineffable age who seems at home in himself, if not in his surroundings.

But when it's Tharlo's turn to have his likeness captured, the photographer finds his hygiene wanting, and so he gamely heads across the street to have his hair washed and tidied. It's in a dingy barbershop that Tharlo meets a very pretty hairdresser whose direct, modern style makes a deep impression. She flirts with him, massages his head with shampoo, and compliments his "cute ponytail." If naive, mild-mannered Tharlo is a classic noir archetype of the hapless stranger, the hairdresser's sideways smile marks her as Tibetan cinema's foremost femme fatale. She invites Tharlo to join her for a night of karaoke, where Tharlo stumbles through the ultimate urban paradox of good and evil: a first date. The private karaoke room, all laser disco lights and tinny pop songs, is claustrophobic and disorienting for Tharlo. They spend the night in the barbershop and it's only the next morning when we see her body lean in for a goodbye kiss, or to whisper something, that we learn her name: Yangtso.

Tharlo returns home to his isolated mountain home and Tseden's camera opens up to the grand sweep of a lonely figure beneath staggering peaks and endless sky. Tharlo tells Dorjie that he thinks he's met a bad person in the city, but it's clear that Yangtso weighs on his thoughts even while the familiar evils of the steppe make trouble for Tharlo and his sheep. At home, he drinks and smokes himself to uncontrollable coughing fits, sets off fireworks to break the stillness of the night, and teaches himself to sing folk love songs. Eventually, he capitulates to temptation, or curiosity, and returns to the city with a stack of cash. Tharlo and Yangtso decide to run away together—to really see Beijing, or even New York City—but not before Yangtso divests Ponytail of his namesake in favor of a more anonymous look.

While assured black and white photography and the contrasting scale of urban and rural geography create a compelling visual language, the truth of Pema Tseden's narrative is heard rather than seen. The sleepy world of the steppe, punctuated by bleating sheep, is delineated from the city's static of cheesy music and diesel engines by the pattering of Tharlo's motorbike, the sounds fully realized even at long distance. In the city, where every image is reframed and refracted in windows and the literal smoke and mirrors of the barbershop, only sound emerges trustworthy. Tharlo's identity is made and unmade in exterior sounds: the cry of his little orphan sheep; his hacking cough; the ugly sonic bleed of the karaoke bar; the loud hum of electric razor Yangtso uses to shave Tharlo's head. When Tharlo wakes up the morning after his haircut to find Yangtso and his fortune gone, he barely appears in our mirrored view of the empty barbershop. It is the sound of him opening and closing drawers, a shuffling of objects grown increasingly frantic that confirms the betrayal.

Returning to Chief Dorjie's bureau, a traumatized Tharlo learns that his ID card has finally arrived. His head shaved by the woman who destroyed him, our hero finds that his identity is null—he no longer resembles the man on the ID card. He'll have to go back to the photographer and start all over again. "I'm afraid now my death will be lighter than a feather," Tharlo despairs, now a stranger to himself.

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*Tharlo* is a story of crushing themes and bald questions of identity, a cautionary tale with an iron spine of rightness gone wrong, but Tseden manages to guide this adaptation of his own novella with an even hand. Heaviness and lightness are juggled in the measured pacing, the story of a man's undoing told simply, but not without irony or an appreciation for the exquisite awkwardness of courtship. In his initial appraisal of Tharlo as a good man, Chief Dorjie claims to possess a policeman's intuition for assessing a person as good or bad on sight, a ludicrous claim that nonetheless tortures Tharlo as his own image changes, molded by the perceptions of others and reduced to ambiguity.

Certainly, questions of Tibetan identity in a Chinese infrastructure cement the story's context, but the influence of politics and modernity is inexorable from Tharlo and Yangtso's graceless love story. Brazen Yangtso is an impalpable figure and Tharlo's attraction to and repulsion by her are the least of her contradictions. She is a Tibetan woman liberated from (or deprived of) her traditional long braids, a Tibetan woman who smokes and sings pop songs and flirts easily, a modern Tibetan woman in a Western Chinese city. While the ID card is an obvious metaphor for Tharlo's fractured identity, the truth of his crisis is manifest in Yangtso. As a Tibetan woman, her physical being is familiar, but Tharlo comes undone when her behavior takes a wrecking ball to his binary convictions, his sense of the world and ability to know himself.

In the moments after Yangtso shaves Tharlo's head, she sits beside him in a barber chair, each captured in separate, adjacent mirrors. Her posture is casual, sizing up this man. Tharlo's troubles may originate in the dangerous act of classification—making physical ones identity in the form of a state-issued card—but romance is another kind of identity crisis. Infatuation is a black hole. And love can dismantle a person, no matter who they think they are.

<http://dgeneratefilms.com/uncategorized/review-of-pema-tsedens-tharlo>