



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
la Biennale di Venezia 2015

Venezia 72  
Competition



# BEHEMOTH

(Bei Xi Mo Shou)

趙亮電影作品  
a film by Zhao Liang





*God created the beast Behemoth on the 5th day.  
It was the largest monster on the land.  
A thousand mountains yield food for him.*

## SYNOPSIS

With camera in tow, filmmaker Zhao Liang travels through the prairies of Mongolia's vast plateau. Unfolding before his eyes are the signs of controversial upheaval due to an aggressive modern economy. Heavenly green grasslands are being covered by the gloomy dust of a growing mining industry. Confronted with the ash and infernal din of incessant mining, herdsman and their families have no choice but to move away as grazing meadows dwindle. Day and night, miners are busy picking out coals from mountains of rocks. In nearby ironworks, men bake in the scorching heat like the condemned in "Inferno." In a sort of "Purgatorio," sufferers of work-related illnesses await death in hospital. A genuine "Paradiso" has been destroyed in exchange for an urban mirage, the empty new buildings of modern ghost town Ordos.

**BEHEMOTH** travels between documentary and narrative, stark truth and allegory, dream and reality. Filmed in breathtaking 4K by Zhao Liang himself, **BEHEMOTH** is a feast of images, sounds and music, inspired by Dante's Divine Comedy. From the acclaimed director of *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* (Festival of 3 Continents 2007 – Best Film), *PETITION* (Cannes Special Screenings 2009) and *TOGETHER* (Berlinale Panorama 2011). Produced by INA in co-production with ARTE France.

## COMMENTS FROM FILMMAKER ZHAO LIANG ACCOMPLICES

The film's title **BEHEMOTH** symbolizes the growth of an enormous evil energy. Just like after the opening of Pandora's box, the devil grows recklessly. It is the totality of humankind's desire and greed. Each and every one of us is a part of the devil. All of us are its accomplices. We all have seen the catastrophic consequences of fuel politics. As some of us are enjoying a more and more luxurious lifestyle, shouldn't we reflect on that way of life? We all are consumers of natural resources, so we are all accomplices of that evil that's hurting the environment. All of us are part of the monster.

The issues explored in **BEHEMOTH** are universally applicable. They are global issues. In other parts of Asia, in North and South America, they are also paying a great price for the environmental damage caused by exploitation and heavy mining. Needless to mention our dependence on fuel has also resulted in wars and regional conflicts.



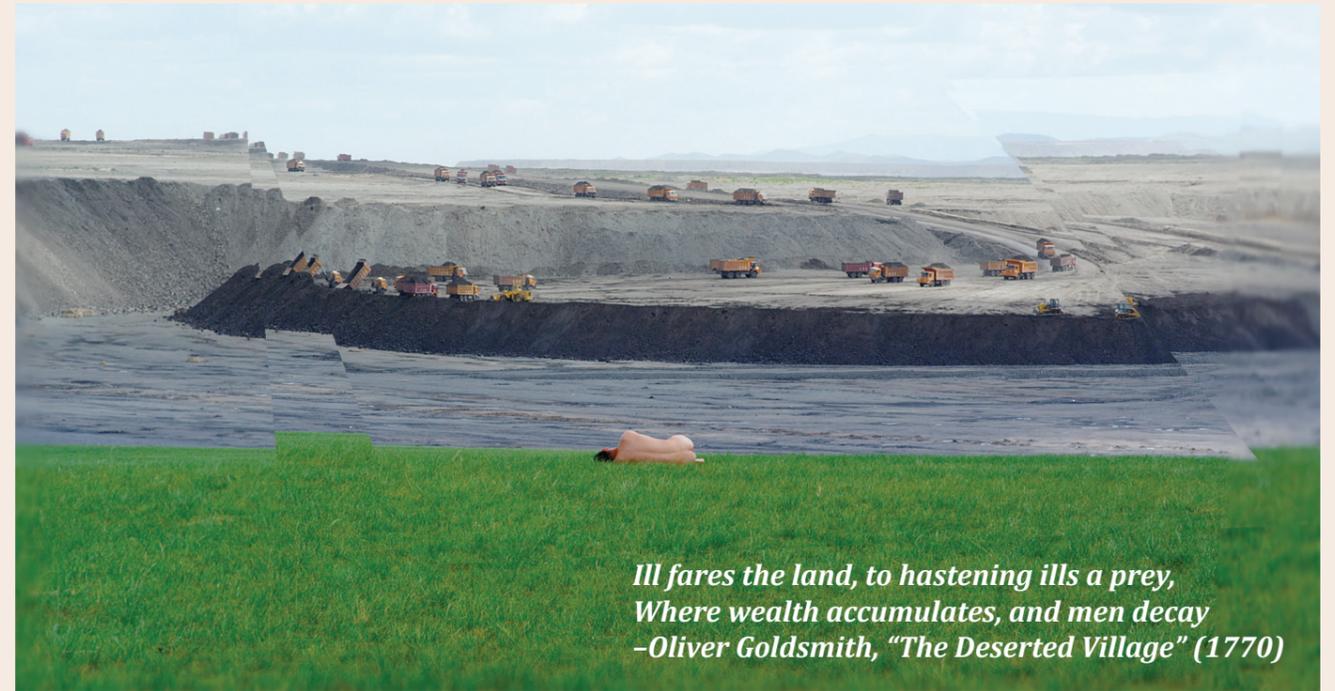
## ANOTHER PLANET

I originally intended to make a road documentary. I drove throughout China. I crossed the Yangtze River, the Yellow River, and traveled a lot in Tibet and Xinjiang. I first arrived in Inner Mongolia in 2012 and stayed there for about a month. I was shocked by the sight of mines there, the endless mountains and pits, completely void of a trace of life. It was as if I had landed on another planet. Seeing this struck me hard as an artist who works with photography and the moving image.



## DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY

I must thank my producer Sylvie Blum for the inspiration of Dante's Divine Comedy. Every time I returned to shooting I always said to her I was going back to Hell. When she looked at the footage I shot, she found stunning similarities between the image and the hell described in Dante's Divine Comedy. Sylvie suggested that I read the Divine Comedy. I took the Chinese version with me on my way back to filming. Then I discovered another incredible coincidence. I had always planned to film the ghost town of Ordos for the final section of my film, and in Mongolian, Ordos means palaces, referring to those in Heaven, paradise.



*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay  
-Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village" (1770)*

## RED, GRAY AND BLUE

After reading the Divine Comedy, I was stunned how perfectly the environment described in Dante's writing from eight centuries ago matches the reality today. Therefore I began to take notes of the phrases that best matched my images so that I could adapt them for use in the film. In **BEHEMOTH**, I used the redness seen in the ironworks to represent "Inferno" (Hell), the grayness created by the dust after a running truck to represent "Purgatorio" (Purgatory), and the surreal blue of the sky in the ghost city of Ordos to represent "Paradiso" (Heaven).

## THE SHOOT

The shooting period took about 2 years. I shot the coal mines and grasslands in eastern Inner Mongolia, the iron mines and the industrial district in the west of Inner Mongolia, and the ghost town in central Inner Mongolia, so I basically covered the whole province. Normally there were three to four people on my team, including a sound engineer, a camera assistant, and sometimes a site producer.

## ANOTHER PLANET

Originally intended to make a road documentary. I drove throughout China. I crossed the Yangtze River, the Yellow River, and traveled a lot in Tibet and Xinjiang. I first arrived in Inner Mongolia in 2012 and stayed there for about a month. I was shocked by the sight of mines there, the endless mountains and pits, completely void of a trace of life. It was as if I had landed on another planet. Seeing this struck me hard as an artist who works with photography and the moving image.



## FILMING AT THE MINING SITES

Any filming activity is not welcomed at those mining sites, because there are often all kinds of illegal activities. Even the mine owners themselves know that what they are doing is damaging the natural environment tremendously. When we were shooting, it was like we were fighting a guerilla war. We had to shoot in one place, then immediately change location. We set some rules for ourselves, like staying in one spot for no longer than five minutes. Or during filming, everyone must squat down so that nobody could see us. But even with these rules, there were still times when we were blocked or stopped and asked to delete what we filmed.



## INTO THE FIRE

The biggest challenge of filming in the ironworks was the heat. Not only is it too hot for human beings, it is too hot for the camera. The camera needed cooling down once in a while, otherwise it would stop working. We had to cover the camera with fabric and cardboard, and we turned on all the fans inside the camera. But even with such measures, the camera turned into a hand-burning piece of metal in only a couple of minutes. As for myself, I felt like I was on fire. Any exposed skin hurts from the scorching heat. My throat burned and speaking became difficult.

When sweat got into my eyes, it was so hot that I couldn't see the viewfinder clearly. I still felt it necessary to get as close as possible when filming in the ironworks. Underground in the pit, the noise of machinery drilling the hard rocks was so loud that I couldn't bear it for long. I felt sick after just 20 minutes in the pit. The humming in my ears lasted for three days afterwards. Those workers suffer from such torture daily. It looked like they were used to it, but I'm sure it is doing great damage to their hearing and cerebral nerves.



## INTERNET RESEARCH

I first looked for big open-air mining sites on Google Maps. I marked them, and then drove to the location according to the GPS positioning. The mine sites changed rapidly. I always hoped to find one good spot to return to and capture how the mine changed over time, but mountains would turn into pits in less than a month's time. Miners proudly told me that moving mountains was a piece of cake for them...

I also acquired online the contact information of the pneumoconiosis patients from the non-governmental organizations. I tracked down those patients to their hometowns to learn about their living conditions and the hardship as petitioners advocating for their rights. The pneumoconiosis patients, the miners and the workers were all very friendly and easy to approach. They are some of the most sincere and honest people I have ever met.



## HEALTH ISSUES

When the lighting was right, we could actually see the sparkling iron dust in the air while shooting in the ironworks. But the workers don't wear any kind of mask. Their lungs must be filled with heavy dust after working there for some time... Those migrant workers who leave their hometowns due to local scarcity of resources, and move to other places to find work, are the pivotal laborers of the modernization process in China.

They don't really have any awareness or knowledge in terms of safety or protection at such work place. They are the most important labor force during the process of capital accumulation under a regime of centralized power. They are the victims. I hope my film can motivate the officials to protect the rights of migrant workers with legal measures. Meanwhile, I hope **BEHEMOTH** can also alarm the workers on the potential health issues so they would start protecting themselves.



## IMAGES ONLY

I shot some footage with interviews and daily conversations, but I cut it during editing because I didn't want to make another film like *PETITION*. I don't like to repeat what I have already done. I am always looking to do something new with my cinematic language. So I decided to tell this story with mostly images only. There really isn't a conventional or apparent narrative.

I also purposefully left out some of the more dramatic and tear-jerking footage, so that the image is colder and more peaceful. I didn't want the film to be overly sentimental and sad. But the feelings that these people's stories evoke remain complex and unforgettable. The struggling and dying pneumoconiosis patients who are advocating for their rights are undoubtedly part of the purgatory part of *BEHEMOTH*.

## GHOST TOWN

The virtually uninhabited Kangbashi area of Ordos is the result of the real estate bubbles and economic foam created by blind development in China. A lot of first and second tier cities have an economic development zone attached to them. During the past two decades, the Chinese economy grew rapidly. But now the market for residential buildings is mostly saturated, so nobody needs these newly-built apartments.

Those real estate developers wanted to make money but ended up facing the capital chain rupture. The result is blocks and blocks of empty office and apartment buildings. Many have been halted at various stages of construction. We didn't see anyone but security guards. The traffic lights work as if they had a purpose. I had heard of this ghost town before, but I was still very surprised when I arrived. This cityscape stands in the middle of the desert, looking so unreal. Just like a movie set.



## ZHAO LIANG

Zhao Liang's **BEHEMOTH** makes its world premiere in Official Competition at the 2015 Venice Film Festival. With his unique vision and acute reflections on social issues and conditions, Zhao has been extending the frontiers of documentary filmmaking in China today. His award-winning **CRIME AND PUNISHMENT** (Best Film - Festival des 3 Continents – Nantes, France; also screened in Locarno) was an eye-opening exploration of military law enforcement in China. His **PETITION** (aka **THE COURT OF THE COMPLAINANTS**) followed a group of disgruntled citizens from 1996 to 2008, and was screened at the Cannes Film Festival (Special Screenings). The film has won several awards at festivals, including including Hong Kong, DocLisboa, Hawaii, DocNZ Auckland and Tiburon. His documentary **TOGETHER** revealed the situation of HIV and AIDS in China, and was screened at the Berlinale Panorama.

Born in Northeastern China (Dandong, Liaoning Province), Zhao Liang graduated from Luxun Academy of Fine Arts in 1992. Based in Beijing since 1993, Zhao has been working as an independent documentary filmmaker as well as a multimedia artist in photography and video art. His works have been exhibited in the International Center of Photography (New York), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid) and numerous other art galleries and museums around the world.



**2015** | **BEHEMOTH (Bei Xi Mo Shou)**  
**2010** | **TOGETHER (Zai Yi Qi)**  
**2009** | **PETITION (Shang Fang)**  
**2007** | **CRIME AND PUNISHMENT (Zui Yu Fa)**  
**2005** | **RETURN TO THE BORDER (Zai Jiang Bian)**  
**2001** | **PAPER AIRPLANE (Zhi Feiji)**

## INA (L'INSTITUT NATIONAL DE L'AUDIOVISUEL)

INA, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (National Audiovisual Institute) is the world's leading source of digitized audiovisual content. INA has collected and preserved 80 years of radio archives and 70 years of television programs, making them available, through ina.fr, to the widest possible international audience.

INA is also heavily involved in audiovisual production often acting as executive producer and co-produces programs with broadcasters from all over the world. The results have been presented in the most prestigious international festivals. For 15 years, INA has helped develop and produce various works by Chinese director Zhao Liang, including **Return to the Border** (2005), **Crime and Punishment** (2007), **Petition** (1996-2009) and **BEHEMOTH** (2015).

## ARTE

The European cultural channel ARTE is offering a wide choice of programs of excellency opened on the reality of the world. ARTE supports talented film-makers all around the world as a co-producer and shows ambitious new creations especially in the documentary field that explore new horizons of the natural world and the world of mankind.

Attentive to the diversity of opinions, and attuned to the world, its fractures and upheavals, the Society and Culture Unit of ARTE France, coproducer of the film, accompanies points of view that are committed and open to debating ideas. It features all types of documentary writing and broaches all areas: History, Investigation, Society, Culture, Geopolitics, Environment, Economy and Politics. The editorial line intends to be at the heart of the challenges that our societies face and make them evolve.

# BEHEMOTH

a film by Zhao Liang

2015 – China/France – 90 minutes – color, DCP - in Mandarin

## MAIN CAST

Narrated by Zhao Liang.

Featuring the local citizens of the Inner Mongolian grasslands and workers from the area's local mines and ironworks.

## MAIN CREW

<b>directed by</b>	Zhao Liang
<b>screenplay by</b>	Zhao Liang, Sylvie Blum
<b>cinematography by</b>	Zhao Liang
<b>sound</b>	Chen Yao, Hu Mengchu, Cao Rui, Li Guocheng
<b>editor</b>	Fabrice Rouaud
<b>music composers</b>	Huzi, Alain Mahé, Mamer
<b>sound mix</b>	Myriam René, Laurent Thomas
<b>visual effects</b>	Eve Ramboz
<b>production managers</b>	Hu Mengchu, Maya Feuillette, Anne Louis
<b>khomei singer</b>	Huun-Huur-Tu (Tuva)
<b>horsehead fiddle players</b>	Hasbagen & Dalai

produced by Sylvie Blum (INA)

a production INA (INA Productions – Fabrice Blancho)

in co-production with ARTE FRANCE (Society and Culture Unit – Martine Saada, Alex Szalat)

with the participation of YLE (Finland), RTS (Switzerland), CNC (France)

with support from The IDFA Bertha Fund, Asia Film Financing Forum (Hong Kong),

Asian Cinema Fund / Asian Network of Documentary

---

**BEHEMOTH will be broadcast on ARTE on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2015 as part of the special programming of ARTE's Documentary Film Festival.**

---

### INA – Press Contact

**Marie Borgen**

+33 1 49 83 23 66

mborgen@ina.fr

### ARTE France – Press Contact

**Rima Matta**

+33 1 55 00 70 41

r-matta@arteFrance.fr

**Pauline Boyer**

+33 1 55 00 70 40

p-boyer@arteFrance.fr



**PRESS CONTACT**

Marie Borgen – INA

[www.ina.fr](http://www.ina.fr)

Tel : +33 1 49 83 23 66

Email : [mborgen@ina.fr](mailto:mborgen@ina.fr)

**SALES & FESTIVAL BOOKINGS**

Michèle Gautard – INA

[www.ina.fr](http://www.ina.fr)

Tel : + 33 1 49 83 29 92

Mobile : + 33 6 74 08 53 87

Email : [mgautard@ina.fr](mailto:mgautard@ina.fr)