

Turning the Camera on Opacity: Documentary that Recreates

Abe Koji (French Literature)

One way of thinking says that in cinema, and especially documentaries, we should be watching the images on the screen, and that anything beyond the screen has no place in discussion. Although this assertion is technically incontrovertible, there are times when images provide a glimpse of things not physically visible.

When events surpass what we can gauge simply by looking at them, we are seized by the desire to deliver our gaze beyond the images themselves. This is because when they show prior scenes of slaughter, loss, or for example disaster, our vision becomes immediately overtaken by a mysterious opacity.

Walter Benjamin said Jean-Eugène Atget's photography of Paris resembled crime scene photos. When crimes scenes are in fact shown, the opacity can no longer cloud our sight.

How should we go about reconstructing and re-presenting things that are opaque, making them clear to be seen? And what should we avoid in this process? One documentary tells the story of frequent killings under a military dictatorship in Indonesia, of people falsely accused of insurgency. The leaders of the group who did the killings are the ones who give testament to the crimes. The film is *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer); by using an approach in which legendary leaders from the death units become the protagonists of the movie, we are confronted by the voices and images of the killers themselves. In a spectacle that could almost be called dance-like, they re-enact their bloody deeds with gusto behind locked doors and on rooftops. Seeing these same murders gazing raptly at the footage of their own recreations, is itself a cinematic weapon / madness likely to lacerate the viewer.

Mass murders and earthquakes and disasters resulting from tsunami cannot be approached on the same level as one other. However the trials of the people telling their experiences in *Voices from the Waves* (Sakai Ko, Hamaguchi Ryusuke) cannot be separated in the sense that an experience that is too massive and powerful for them to even grasp has given them wounds that are still raw and uncovered. These wounds are in the background of these families' calmly affectionate conversations. Throughout what they say, we recognize the hopes, perhaps mundane, inherent in living with the opacity of something beyond their vision. There is a moment reminding us of this opacity, in one of the old tales in *Storytellers*, by the same directors. Samurai missing their legs are spotted by the riverside. They are the shadows of people revived from the dead. As the narrator tells (in fact, as the singer sings) this strange tale, reminiscent of something out of *Tales of Tono*, the joys and sorrows

of her life are brought to the surface.

Revision (Philip Scheffner), takes as its subject the seemingly accidental shooting death of illegal workers by hunters in the corner of a cornfield on the Eastern European border. The waves of testimonies spread like the wind blowing too vigorously through the corn leaves. People say that they decided it was time to discuss the incident, as they aren't sure what happened either. A storyteller cannot merely just tell a story unilaterally. To talk about something is also to turn your ears to your own voice that has begun to speak. In the film, the witnesses hear the recordings of their testimony, becoming listeners to their own voices. And when the audience sees these witnesses listening to their own voices, they cannot help but trying to stare at something that isn't on the screen. Just like the priest standing by the site of a grave vandalism 20-years prior, afraid since there is no sign of evidence.

This is why there is no end to "verification (=re-vision)." And to the wish to transmit stories. Rithy Panh's *S21, the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, shown at the 2003 festival, is a film about the director's own never ending questions. The film takes as its subject members of the Pol Pot government who had detained, abused, and killed many citizens. It shows the same perpetrators re-enacting what they had originally done, in the same locations. Seeing these guards act like machines, following orders to hurt people they can't see, we realize that we couldn't ourselves recreate the actions even if we wanted to, and we are confronted with the presence of the unrepresentable.

It seems that in Rithy Panh's new work, *The Missing Picture* (2013), he finally tells the story of his prison camp experience of his childhood, and about the loss of his own family; although all through the means of expressionless dolls. The villagers in *We Want (U) to Know* (Ella Pugliese, Nou Va, the people of Thnol Lok), are only just beginning to tell their stories. Husbands taken away for "education," women massacred, old women whose children were killed: the villagers reenact the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. Young people who never saw the Khmer Rouge are given their clothes, and learn how they wore their scarves offering themselves in reenactments following the same sequence of events as happened to families in the village. Those turning the cameras and microphones on them urging them to speak are from the same village, the children. Is this storytelling for them in a place beyond their reach? Or is it something that might be called an ethnographical act, free of ethical verification, that realizes the questions and recollections that endlessly fill everyday life? (Translated by Barbara Hartley)

■ Screenings

The Act of Killing 【IC】10/12 10:00- [A6] | 10/13 18:00- [CL]

Voices from the Waves 【IC】 10/12 16:30- [A6] | 10/14 14:30- [CL]

Storytellers 【PJ】 10/13 10:00- [F3] | 10/14 18:50- [F4]

Revision 【IC】 10/11 18:45- [A6] | 10/14 19:00- [CL]

We Want (U) to Know 【NAC】 10/12 13:30- [F3] | 10/13 10:30- [F5]