« Cinéma du Réel » - 2023

Interview with Kimi Takesue and Gaspard Bonaldi about Onlookers (2023)

- Looking at your filmography, we realize that a lot of your films rest upon the observation of a specific geographical area, and of the human beings wandering in it: Vietnam, New York City, Uganda…

First of all, I approach documentary in a very loose and exploratory way, driven by curiosity. And I love to travel! That really is the starting point for many of these projects: a place that I am interested in visiting. Travel activates my ability to see, to be present, and to experience things in a much more sensorial, visceral way.

Moreover, cross-cultural encounters are a large thematic undercurrent in my work. I am fascinated by the meeting point when two people from different cultures come together and search for a mode of communication, a lot of times outside of language. That connects a lot to my background, as I am a biracial person: I am half Japanese-American, half Caucasian. I was raised in Hawaii as a child, then my parents divorced and I moved to Massachusetts. I moved between these two radically different cultural zones while I was growing up, and had a pretty contradictory upbringing. So, I had the ability to be a chameleon and integrate into environments, but also to exist outside, as an observer. My films are often about that pulsation between connection and detachment, intimacy and voyeurism…

- In Looking for Adventure (2013), especially, you were interested in tourism in Peru, and you used similar devices as in Onlookers. Do you see a continuity between these two documentaries ?

The piece Looking for Adventure is a bit special: that was a group tour that I went on with my mom, to Peru. On this trip to Peru, I traveled on a very prescriptive path and one of the things I was struck by was the lack of interaction with locals outside of the tourist economy. The Peruvians we met were serving the tourists in various capacities. I was also fascinated by that contradictory experience of tourists wanting to have ~~a~~ new, "authentic" cultural experiences, and yet at the same time wanting things that are very familiar. And I think that kind of contradiction exists within us all.

As for Onlookers, I had always heard that Laos was really beautiful, and had an incredibly serene culture. There is so much change happening in South-East Asia, through globalization and rapid development: I really wanted to travel to Laos while it still maintains its distinct pace and culture. Being from Hawaii, there are many things in Laos that are very familiar to me and that I immediately gravitated to: the tropical environment and a certain kind of laid-back quality to the culture. In Onlookers, I was not on as prescriptive of a path as in Looking for Adventure, but there is no doubt there is a very standard backpackers' itinerary that I was going on. And the film is looking at that phenomenon: backpacker tourism, but also Asian group tourism.

- The look that Onlookers gets at the tourists visiting Laos is not openly critical or mocking. You rather make us feel, for example with the title, an affinity with these characters. What is your specific relationship with tourism and touristic photography?
The film is not intended to be an easy indictment of the vulgarity of tourism that is apart from oneself, because we are all part of this. For anyone who has ever had any opportunity - and privilege - to travel, it is only fair to implicate oneself and to reflect on the experience. The film is looking critically at some of the disruptive qualities of tourism, but there are so many pleasures of travel as well, and I am trying to capture a whole spectrum of contradictory human experiences. There is exhilaration, there is exhaustion, there is intrusion, there is connection.

Going back to photography, Onlookers is a film that celebrates the image. The film is presented in very formal tableaus with an interplay between naturalism and stylization. I am a filmmaker who is visually driven: I look for very particular compositions, in a photographic way, and then there is all this spontaneity that unfolds within the frame. I am interested in that tension between imposed authorship and unpredictability. I am also trying to let the choreography of travel fully play out. There is that sense of invasion, with people coming and consuming, photographing and then leaving the frame. And the enduring majesty of the environment continues on, without them.

- The length, the fixity and the distance in the shots that compose your movie remind the "views" of the Lumière brothers, at the beginning of cinema. Do you see your film in the inheritance of these directors-travelers, capturing "blocks" of reality?

I love the connection you are making. It is interesting, as I get older, how I like slowing down even more, really watching things unfold. This democracy of the long take gives the viewer the opportunity to engage with the image in the way they want to. Even for me, after seeing this film so many times, I continue to discover new things within the frame. That for me is very pleasurable. All of my work is described as slow, but it's all relative. When I look back at other films, I realize: "Oh, that wasn't that slow!"

- We can feel that at the end of the movie. In the last sequence, you are extending time even more.
I almost think of it like Henri Cartier-Bresson, in the sense of the decisive moment - but these are extended decisive moments. It is still a very particular moment that is unfolding and has to have that precision that Cartier-Bresson speaks about in a single photograph. It is very special when all of these elements work together: the light, the color, the movement, the sound, the meaning…In Onlookers I explore decisive moments with duration.

That last shot is the ultimate expression of that. The film is so much about the pleasure of portraiture: you see that unbelievably long procession of monks, but each face, if you actually pay attention to the little distinctions, is really amazing. Then, the way that people exit that frame… There is a kind of magic within it. These moments are really exhilarating for a filmmaker.

Within the film, you see both the way I'm seduced by that beauty, but I'm also trying to look critically at a certain form of cultural fetishism and show an alternative side. It's not only the monks that are presented in the film, but I am interested in the people who are giving the alms, in the morning. It's the everyday people, who are sitting by the road at 5:30 in the morning, congregating as neighbors, socializing with one another and patiently waiting to give offerings to the monks. Again and again, we see this expression of generosity and grace. I was really moved by that aspect of Laotian culture: that is something that most people don't focus on, but it is a structuring principle in the film.

- People in Onlookers often glance at the movie camera, when they realize they are being filmed, and then react in a more or less discreet way. Did you get in contact with the people before starting recording?

No, I am not interacting with anyone: these are totally spontaneous moments. When I am in public spaces, I do feel we have freedom to capture the world, if we are not unfairly representing someone. I am often just placing myself somewhere for quite a while. And because I'm working in a very inconspicuous way, with a very small camera, I don't draw a lot of attention to myself. I do look pretty much like another tourist!

As for the reactions, we are in spaces where so many people are busy photographing that there is less awareness about that. I am also venturing on a parallel track where tourists don't generally go, so local Laotians are a bit mystified as to what I am finding of interest! For example, towards the end of the film, there is that long pathway that is leading to where they ring the bells in the morning. But it is also the path that the school children take at the end of the day! I actually was not aware of the fact that this huge group of school kids was going to suddenly enter that frame. And then, as they are walking along there, they are turning their heads and looking back at me, and there are these interactions that I really enjoy. Kids are keen observers and they share the same kind of curiosity that I have.

- When you would wake up in the morning during the shooting, did you know what you were going to film, or was it more like an adventure?
I had a general sense of the places that I was going to most likely visit, but making a film alone like this is such an internal, intuitive experience… You can respond so quickly to small things that emerge, that lead you in a different direction, without much thought.

It becomes a kind of meditation. I think part of the beauty of this kind of filmmaking is trying to not impose an expectation and an agenda. I am always fighting against any kind of expectation, because once you create that, the quality of this filmmaking changes for me. Part of it is to have a sense of looseness, of discovery, of openness. This tension, I think, is very interesting: you are coming informed with certain ongoing thematic, stylistic and aesthetic interests, but how do you remain very loose, so that it's not extractive in the same way?

- The precise sound work builds a clear-cut opposition between your film and the silent films we talked about earlier. Sound guides the spectators' eyes towards things that they could have missed. How did you design the ambience and the sound effects of your film?

It is an immersive and sensorial piece, so I want you to feel as though you were there, and the sound really helps for that. Even it is a naturalistic reconstruction overall, rooted in the authenticity of those places, there are additional layers of sound. It is not Jacques Tati, but I heightened certain sounds that draw attention to the action, or behavior, or detail. Sound is also used here to highlight moments of humor, because there is a lot of dry humor in the film! It is about identifying and relating to some of the awkwardness of life, of our human foibles that I think we have to also laugh at. These sounds draw attention to the small moments of indecision, of limbo, of in-betweenness. So, the soundtrack is really, really detailed!

- There is an interesting tension between this dynamic of immersion and the frontal shots that compose the film, which, I think, are not a way to immerse the spectator. From what I hear, I feel inside the place; but from what I see, I will always be an outsider.

That is a great observation! I do think that there is that distance in these frames, and a certain formality. But it is hard, because I don't want it to be clinical, and many films that I see that have this formal quality end up feeling cold. I am interested in formal beauty, but I want there to be the humanism, the life force! I do think that sound offers some of those textures, some of that intimacy, but it is also so delicate! I find it fascinating to see the different styles employed by different filmmakers and what it reveals about the sensibility of the makers. Ultimately, for me, I feel real empathy and connection with the subjects in my films, with their redeeming qualities and their flaws. So much complexity in life is revealed through the act of deep looking and listening within these cross-cultural encounters, but a tension also remains for me, in being both an insider and outsider simultaneously.