

FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Long Story Short. Director, **Natalie Bookchin**. 2016. 45 minutes.
Colour. Distributed by Icarus Films, United States.

This is an audio-visual narrative about being a human. *Long Story Short* presents us with a dialogue about poverty. The director interviewed over 100 people at homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs and job training centres in Los Angeles and the Bay Area in Northern California. ‘You don’t really know how people are when looking at them until you ask them’.

The film editing is masterful. The interviewees are juxtaposed to each other and interchange according to the themes discussed. The effect is amazing in the sense that those who do not speak appear to be the audience of those who do; next to each other, to each other. The sound in the film is like a symphony. Silence has an important role in the entire talking show. The purpose of the film is to give voice to those who are rarely heard. Urban poverty is a global issue and it can come as a surprise to anyone. The goal of the film is to understand the cause of poverty and to stimulate debates about better public services and social assimilation.

‘Money is power. You need money to feel like a normal citizen. You cannot participate without it in normal life. Without it, you are not a human! It is a new kind of slavery’. The film is shot in Los Angeles, California, where the rich live on the hills and the poor live downtown. The rich are distant and unfamiliar from the urban conditions. They do not know about urban poverty. According to the

participants, living on welfare is not a solution. One cannot live on monthly welfare payments and pay the rent. People work and still have no home. They simply do not earn enough.

Who are the homeless people? Do you really know who they are? It is common to think that they are mentally ill, but then, when you get into that position yourself you say: ‘Me? I never thought of being homeless’. Most people do not understand that being homeless is hard work, unpaid, a 24 hour a day job. ‘To work feels good. I want to work. But, I got no phone where they can contact me; no address; no shower to take before doing a job interview [...] We sleep in the car. Because of all that you are not comfortable, you are exhausted and that makes it hard to go to the interview. People can feel it’. [Silence]

The film introduces us to educated people, those who lost a good job and could not find a new one and thus slipped into greater depths, and homelessness. We also get to know those who were in jail. Most of the homeless interviewed, however, are ordinary citizens. Many have seen gunfire, police shooting innocent people only because they were living on the street. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We also learn that without good guidance, one can get on a wrong path in life. Many say that they did not have a good childhood. They followed their parents’ footsteps with lack of mentoring and education. When the family becomes poor, the mother does two or three jobs, and the older children look after their younger brothers and sisters. ‘When growing up we did not make the right choices. We did not have tools; role models! You have to learn it [...] You need to learn how to become

rich'. Some found their escape in alcohol, some in reading books, and some in social media. It is something that takes them out of the situation.

'Is there a way out? Lots of times there isn't!' At the end of the film, there is no actor and no audience, only an empty seat.

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Visible Silence. Director, **Ruth Gumnit**. 2015. 47 minutes. Colour.

Visible Silence is an engaging and informative documentary film about gender-nonconforming Thai women. The film focuses on the narrative and life histories of women known as 'toms' (from tomboy), a reference to a masculine woman who is sexually involved with a feminine partner, or 'dees' (from lady). The film aptly captures the ways that these Thai women balance societal norms and familial expectations with their desire for visibility and acceptance in Thai society.

Their stories also shed light on their hopes and fears. One woman, for example, yearns for companionship and love. As she states: 'I'm getting older. I really want to have a woman who can spend her life with me [...] who understands me [...] I want that'. Another woman reflects on the stereotypes of 'toms' as 'sex obsessed'. According to her: 'They presume all toms just run after any woman. That's wrong. I am an adult and know how to act properly'. Yet another laments the discriminatory attitudes in the workplace. She discusses how on business trips, typically two female

colleagues share a room, and that she is always the last one to get a room. 'They never put me in a room with a woman with a pretty face. I always get picked last. Sometimes I feel like I am a disease'.

The lives of these women unfold in a changing and modernizing Thai urban society. The interviews with women are juxtaposed with scenes of cityscapes and public culture in urban Thailand. Women preparing food in roadside cafes, the hustle and bustle of a market, a crowded metro train and a skyline replete with high rise buildings point to progress and modernity that, at least on the surface, is inclusive of women. Signs of social change are also evident. Scenes from a public march for marriage equality illustrate the emergence of a gay community that is informed by 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual' (LGBTQIA) movements in the West. Yet, as gleaned from the documentary, modernity co-exists with tradition in scenes of people worshipping in Buddhist temples and narrow streetways traversing older parts of a city.

The urban milieu foregrounds the stories of the women. For women from small towns and villages, the city can provide an escape from the watchful eye of family and community members that expect conformity. For others, it is travel to Europe and the United States of America, and not cities in Thailand, that provides the social space to construct identities as women who love other women and to connect with other lesbian women. Such international travel experiences are significant for enabling women to establish a modern lesbian identity and subjectivity.

Visible Silence provides valuable insights into the lives of toms and 'dees' in

Thailand and is highly captivating. However, there are a few issues that compromise the viewer's ability to fully immerse themselves in the film. For one, the women are not fully contextualized in terms of their socioeconomic status or within specificities of their familial and social identities. Moreover, the director does not identify the women featured in the film by name or by other identifying markers. These omissions limit the extent to which viewers can engage with the subjects on screen in more humanistic terms. Moreover, the urban setting depicted in the film is also not specifically defined. A voiceover or captions with information about the setting would provide greater depth to the narratives.

These issues aside, the film is an important addition to documentaries about culturally constructed sexualities and should be of interest to students, scholars and lay audiences interested in gender and sexuality. *Visible Silence* highlights the experience of 'toms' and 'dees' as they transgress gender norms but remain silent due to societal constraints. In *Visible Silence* they get to tell their stories.

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Live from UB. Director, **Lauren Knapp**. 2015. 85 minutes. Colour. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources.

Lauren Knapp, the director, writer and producer of the full-length film *LIVE FROM UB* calls herself a 'non-fiction storyteller'. However, her background in anthropology shines through, and the

central themes of this documentary — national identity and globalisation as expressed through rock music — focus on the post-socialist urban youth of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital. These are key issues for anthropologists interested in the post-socialist world, ethnomusicology, and identity and social change more broadly. Furthermore, in this country of 3 million, nearly half now live in the capital. Thus, the recent urbanisation of this formerly nomadic society is an underlying theme.

A number of Mongolia's most important musicians, bands, and music promoters of the past several decades provide running commentary. The film contextualises the emergence of a uniquely Mongolian rock-fusion genre. Original musical footage from the Soviet period and the early post-Soviet 1990s helps explain the variety of styles experimented by different bands, as the post-socialist decades allowed exposure to more foreign music than had been permitted previously. In the 1970s and 1980s, subversive rock-loving musicians struck compromises with the cultural censors: to be allowed to play even soft rock, they were forced to play traditional folk music (which at times was electrified). There is a longer story to tell about the role of rock in counter-hegemonic practices in socialist societies. Tom Stoppard's play 'Rock 'n' Roll' shows how this played out in 1960s Czechoslovakia.

The early days of independence saw a phase of mimicry of Western bands, particularly the Beatles (a large Beatles monument was erected). This transformed as some musicians realised that they could not compete with Western musicians, so they began to look inward, examining

indigenous sounds, instruments, shamanism and Buddhism. The music of the band that plays the film's central role, Mohanik, developed a strong relationship to nature and a nomadic, romanticised past. At the same time, an emergent Mongolian nationalism was flourishing, much of which centred on the heroic Genghis Khan. Urban music videos featured Khan and his warriors, in traditional clothing on horseback on the steppe, celebrating Mongolianness. The subtext here, that after decades of USSR propaganda teaching Mongolians to be ashamed of the evil Genghis Khan, they were now free to celebrate him as their national hero. This process is far from unique, as Khan's putative descendant, Tamurlane-Timur has undergone a similar historical revision in Uzbekistan.

The film incorporates helpful commentary from an animated member of parliament who presents a cultural-historical-political analysis, tracing the connections in Mongolia between freedom of speech and rock music.

Ulaanbaatar's uncontrolled, un-zoned urban sprawl takes a post-nomadic form. Scenes of yurts on the outskirts of the city contrast with ubiquitous Soviet-era housing blocks. One of the musicians expresses this juxtaposition, explaining that they are still nomadic despite urbanisation, and how horses have a place of pride. One of the early hits in this genre, Mohanik's 'I wish I had a horse' mines Mongolian folk rhythms and melodies, while celebrating the nomadic horse-filled past. One of the musicians describes the quest for a new, localised rock that 'didn't need to be imported', and we hear the confluence of beatbox and throat singing.

This well-crafted film also examines the economic precarity faced by the young musical visionaries it features. Ulaanbaatar is the sole city in the country where they can work; so some travel to China to play concerts. Constantly seeking audiences and financial support, despite positive reviews, they are frustrated by their peers' preference for Western pop music. An elderly musician affirms: 'it's time for the young to write their own history'. Indeed, Mohanik are attempting just that.

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The Auction House. A Tale of Two Brothers.
Director/Screenwriter, **Edward Owles**.
2014. 85 minutes. Colour. Native Voice
Films.

Anwer Saleem had lived in England ever since he left Kolkata for higher education in 1969. Arshad his younger brother had stayed back to help his father with the family business, 'The Russell Exchange', which is India's oldest auction house. Bought from the British in 1940 by their grandfather, the brothers remember it being the 'Sotheby's of India', patronised by the elite of Kolkata. Today the auction house resembles a derelict warehouse crammed with an assortment of goods ranging from antique furniture to cheap ceramic figurines and used DVDs, and patronised mainly by those at the lower-end of the socio-economic ladder. The film begins with Anwer returning home from London to rescue the business from becoming a historical artefact by 'bringing [it] to the 21st century'. The scene is set for what becomes a nuanced, unsentimental, sometimes

comical, yet deeply emotive exploration into how individuals and families navigate the inexorable force of social change even as they try to define and stay true to their core values: loyalty to kin, family honour, commitment to one's faith, and constancy in their business dealings.

At the heart of the film is a question about whether the profit motive of contemporary business is compatible with the ethic of responsibility to community. Anwer pushes for efficiency in a globalised marketplace in which economic transactions have become increasingly impersonal. For Arshad the business represents enduring relationships with both employees and customers. Anwer understands — after all, his return to India is motivated by family loyalty not profit — but struggles with how to run a viable business that he hopes to pass on to the next generation. He turns down a lucrative offer to convert the place into 'a gentlemen's club', because it compromises his religious values, but relents to a fashion show — which Arshad grumbled was a 'circus'. It is when an employee of more than forty years has to be fired for negligence that these competing values are tested. Although Anwer is furious upon discovering that the employee had been drinking at work, which allowed a robbery, he eventually throws a farewell party to appreciate the man's loyal service.

Rather than being nostalgic about the past, the film skilfully reveals the contradictions of thinking within the binary framework of 'tradition' and 'modernity' through questions the brothers themselves verbalise in their soliloquies and dialogues: Has Kolkata changed? Or are we stuck in time? Should we be proud of our heritage or

ashamed of our present? Have we become antiquated or are we being faithful to tradition? And ultimately: what should we do with a business that stands for both the family's progress in the past as well as its stagnation in the present?

The cinematography meditates on these questions by depicting a changing urban landscape. Inside 'The Russell Exchange' we get brief glimpses into its former glory. When the camera lingers on antique indigo lampshades and large Grecian sculptures we can imagine a time when the auction house was located at the heart Kolkata's business district, which is home to successful industrialists — a 'posh area' says Anwer. But the signs of urban decay are everywhere: from the mouldy walls of the auction house to the neighbourhood populated by struggling small businesses and street vendors. The rich have 'moved on' to more 'modern' neighbourhoods, reflects Arshad. It captures the capriciousness of 'modernity' — always aspired to but never achieved.

The film ends on a hopeful note. But we are left with the question: will 'The Russell Exchange' continue with the next generation?

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