
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Playing with Nan. Directed by **Dipesh Kharel and Asami Saito**. 2012. 88 minutes. Colour. Distributed by The Royal Anthropological Institute. DVD.

The film's synopsis describes the story of a young man from Nepal who migrated to work in a Nepali restaurant in northern Japan. His name is Ram, and he lives with his colleague Raju, who also works for a Nepali boss. As we watch the film, we get to meet Ram's family in Nepal – his wife, son, parents, grandmother and sister. The narration of Ram's story frequently shuttles back and forth between Japan and Nepal. One of the film's main themes is exploitation. We see it at all levels. Ram and Raju are being exploited by their Nepali employers who run a network of poor Nepali workers desperate to find a way out of a life of poverty at home. Trying to find a solution, they become entangled in a web of debts and loans. And while the villagers think that the men are doing well in Japan, they and their families know the true price of realizing this Japanese dream.

Exploitation is also visible in Nepal. It is visible in Ram's parents' life, where they toil in their fields and yet do not earn sufficient to live on. It appears in the life of his wife in urban Kathmandu, where she has to work hard to survive in the city with her young son. It is also clear when Ram tells how he left school to be able to buy simple comforts in life, like proper clothes. Deprivation therefore seems to be part of the globalization processes that allowed Ram, unfamiliar with the Japanese language, to work and live in Japan for two

years. One of the consequences is the separation of families. Cheap forms of communications are available, but this is not enough. Family members remain apart. While Ram gets to joke around and talk to Japanese women on a daily basis, he is unable to talk to his own family or be with them that often.

The theme of gender lies at the core of this movie. It is called *Playing with Nan*, because Ram and Raju often make nans, a South-Asian bread, while working in the restaurant. This raises a very important question: would they make nans in their own homes? Ram and Raju are seen cooking and cleaning their rented room every day, but would they do the same in their own homes, back in Nepal?

The patriarchal nature of Nepalese society is evident throughout the film. It appears, for example, when Ram's father speaks of his daughter-in-law's 'tantrums' and his criticism of women's use of mobile phones. Ram's wife is perceived as a bad daughter-in-law for trying to obtain a better life by moving to the city. Ram's father even admits that he had married his son off just to obtain another pair of hands to work in his fields. Women are objectified as no more than a means of reducing the family work load. Moreover Ram's wife is accused by his family of spending most of his earnings, when most of his income is actually spent by his family, including his brother.

In many ways, then, this film shows how poverty is a vicious circle. It tells us how poverty leads to school drop outs and illiteracy, low wages and exploitation, and how each of these in turn perpetuates the other problems. Finally, it is interesting to hear how Ram and Raju like Japan's

‘systematic’ society. Would they be willing, though, to correct the ‘disorder’ that characterizes their own society? This is a very important question, one left unanswered.

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Under the Palace Wall. Directed by **David MacDougall**. 2014. 53 minutes. Colour. Distributed by Royal Anthropological Institute. DVD.

This film is an outcome of the Childhood and Modernity Project, based at the Research School of Humanities and the Arts of the Australian National University. The project’s aim was to provide insights into children’s lives in contemporary India and, more generally, into children’s ways of looking at the world.

This film brings the village of Delwara in southern Rajasthan into the viewer’s living room. This village was part of the Kingdom of Mewar during the sixteenth century. The former palace to which the title refers is now a luxury hotel. The film depicts the village life through the children’s eyes. There is no narration, no background music and no protagonists, only impressionistic imagery: cows, flies, school lessons, prayers and meals, paintings on the walls depicting scenes from the Rajput tradition.

One of the most striking sequences begins with a girl using her left hand to write. The school songs include the patriotic song *Vande Matram* and the revolutionary *Le Mashaale Chal Pade Hai* (we have taken our torches and

started marching for justice). A teacher addresses a class and tells one student, Areeb Khalid, a Muslim child, to write an essay on *Diwali* or *Holi* – both Hindu festivals. The moral of the story: ‘In times of crisis, it is the mother tongue that instinctively comes out’. One scene shows a bicycle repair shop-owner with deeply hennaed hair. Temple construction, painting a name plate, children making i-cards, adults playing a game of dice in the street, a man making tea and another cooking meals, fetching well water to irrigate the fields, the large expanses of wheat fields. And then a sunset as the backdrop to an ancient temple and the ritual called the *aarti*, offering prayers to the local female deity.

A life that continues under the palace’s wall. The film has the intrinsic quality of taking us along the small by-lanes of a village called Delwara. David MacDougall is known as an observational ethnographic filmmaker. He uses just one camera, only goes where invited, avoids using set-ups and films people at their own pace and in their own terms. He purposefully shies away from narration or dialogue.

The goal of the film is to introduce something entirely mundane into the elitist discourses of academia. We see the simple, everyday life of the Indian village of Delwara. Anthropologists, especially ethnographers, who try to build on the exotica of the Asian world will surely learn a lesson or two from David MacDougall’s sensitive and non-partisan view. The question of the film’s accuracy does not arise since there are no sets, no storyline, no script, no actors, just a day in the life of the villagers of Delwara. And

this is the filmmaker's strong point. Like a portal, it allows itself to be viewed by differently contextualized viewers in distinct ways. After all, Delwara, located in the southern part of Rajasthan, with its distinct cultural nuances and rich historical past, is not widely known to the rest of the world. For some, the grime and poverty may dominate the film's imagery, others may take religion to be the dominant motif, and others still may see particular gender constructs through the *purdah*-wearing women going about their daily chores. Yet many others will see the village from the children's eyes, as I have been led to see.

The film is much more than what it promises on its back cover. The work follows on from MacDougall's film *SchoolScapes*, which adopted a similar methodology, exploring impressionistic motifs to tell the tale of Rishi Valley School, which is run on the principles of J. Krishnamurty, the great Indian philosopher and educationist. This film's use of everyday impressionistic motifs, which symbolize a multitude of facets and evoke a subtle and deep range of imagery, is a lesson to be learnt not only by filmmakers but also by researchers in the fields of sociology and anthropology.

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Delhi At Eleven. Directed by **Ravi Shivare, Anshu Singh, Aniket Kumar Kashyap and Kumar Dalsus**. 2013. 82 minutes. Colour. Distributed by The Royal Anthropological Institute. DVD.

This film began as a school project at the CIE Experimental Basic School in New

Delhi. Four young filmmakers – two boys and two girls – participating in a video workshop offer four different video clips. An anthropologist was also involved, though unfortunately the audience is left unaware of what his role in the process was.

The DVD brings together the four video clips, presenting them as New Delhi as seen through the eyes of the four eleven-year-old children. It introduces each part by showing the filmmaker with his or her camera (an example is found on the cover), telling us what they wanted to do and why. In so doing, the DVD offers both the final products and the ideas behind each small film, and the creative tension between the two.

The four parts are very different from each other, and their diversity evokes two ideas: the complexity of the city and, at the same time, the fresh perspective from which we are able to observe it (placing the audience in the middle of the action).

My Lovely General Store (by Ravi Shivhare) covers a single day at a tiny general store, beginning and ending with the opening and closing of a rusty rolling door. It shows us both staff and customers, paying special attention to their interactions. The narrative follows the products: their delivery to the store, classification and shelving, selling, bookkeeping, the final delivery to customers, and cleaning up any waste left on the streets by closing time.

Why Not a Girl? (by Anshu Singh) asks boys and girls what boys are allowed to do but girls are not. It ends with the

filmmaker filming herself on the roof (against her father's orders), wondering why girls are not allowed to do the same things as boys, and announcing that should she become someone one day, she will challenge this unfair treatment.

My Funny Film (by Aniket Kumar Kashyap) is about friends and family. It shows the filming process itself by recording both before and after the actual take is shot (unknown to the others being filmed). This allows us to see how people get ready in front of the camera, what they choose to perform, how they develop their performance, how they finish, and their reactions to the eventual outcome. It includes interruptions by other people who decide to appear in front of the camera, generating conflicts and sometimes altering the initial project.

Children at Home (by Shikha Kumar Dalsus) follows a boy through a single day, from the moment his mother tries to wake him up until the family gathers at night to play a board game, showing us a series of detailed tableaux at home and school. The filmmaker includes herself in the film and family life by catching her own image filming in the mirror.

The DVD ends with one of the children editing his own footage. Aside from this image, there is no conclusion or bonus material to wrap up the four parts. I think this has the intention (or the effect) of downplaying any process between filmmakers and audience, giving us the impression that we are watching New Delhi through the windows opened and

created by the children, and generating the powerful illusion that we, as ethnographers, have been there.

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