

Kimi Takesue's *Where Are You Taking Me?:
The Unbridgeable Gap*

by Berenice Reynaud



One summer in the last century, as I was visiting the historical city of Fez, in Morocco, I passed near a tannery. Through an archway, I could see a large courtyard, where huge vats had been dug in the ground. Each of these vats contained a dye – red, blue, green – and men were plunging large sheets of leather into them. I was fascinated, and tried to get a picture with my little still camera. The men looked at me with hostility. I had learnt from my father, who had traveled throughout Africa, that many people won't let you take a picture of them, because they think the camera is taking their soul – so I quietly withdrew. A young man approached me. “If you want to take a picture of them, I can bring you to a place where they won't see you.” “If they don't want me to take a picture of them, I am not going to do it.” The young man's demeanour changed, and he invited me to accompany him for a whole day. He was a hashish seller, but for the local men. Instead of taking a picture, I entered the image. I went with him to the back rooms of little cafés where older men wearing turbans and long robes were sipping strong green tea with mint and smoking.

Kimi Takesue is braver – and wiser – than my 20-year old self. She enters the image and takes the pictures. She faces the question that is asked of her – of her camera. Where are you taking me? Where are you taking my image? Are you stealing it? Or, since you are from New York, are you going to make me famous? Or infamous, pitiful, despicable? What is your goal in taking my story away from the texture of my daily life, away from this land I inhabit, this land on which blood was shed, the blood of my relatives, the blood I may have spilled myself? You can record colors and sounds, but can you carry with you the smell of our streets, our markets – the odor of tamarind, chili, curry, acacia, ripe fruit, intoxicating flowers, roasted goat meat, leaves, roots, sesame, banana beer, saffron, coriander, ginger, cloves, peanuts – the odor that comes from the earth, or the odor of our sweat?

The not-so-enigmatic title encapsulates her project – which

foregrounds the relationship between the filming subject and those she films. Africa is in a paradoxical state. Long a colorful picture book for the colonial gaze, it has become less and less present in today's globalized media representation – in spite of a handful of local filmmakers having reached international status.

The “Forget Africa” series was commissioned by the Rotterdam International Film Festival in a desire to further break down the binary opposition inherited by colonialism. In one of her essays, theoretician/ filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha writes that “‘Correct’ cultural filmmaking usually implies that Africans show Africa; Asians, Asia; and Euro-American,... the World.” So, inviting non-Western filmmakers – some Asian (from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, The Philippines) – some with hyphenated identities (Beijing-based Filipina, Indian American, African American, or mixed-heritage Asian American like Takesue) – alongside US or European filmmakers (from Austria and Germany) to shoot in Africa was a way to counter and dispel this cultural cliché and the hierarchical structure of power and representation that comes with it. The 12 filmmakers chose vastly different approaches, from experimental narratives to documentaries, in Angola, Cameroon, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and, in the case of Takesue, Uganda.

“Africa” exists as a dream, a concept for political organizing, or a convenient trope for Western ignorance – while it is a plural reality, a rich assortment of cultures, ethnicities, political systems, landscapes, urbanism, vegetation. The Rotterdam project sought to match this diversity with a plurality of gazes. And so Takesue went to Uganda. 50 years after the wave of independence, African countries are receding more and more from the colonial history through which we have tried to comprehend them. Tribal-based struggles for power, genocides and civil wars have torn them apart. The current government of Uganda waged a 20-year civil war against the Lord's Resistance Army based in the northern part of the country, and got involved in neighboring

conflicts such as Rwanda, Congo and Sudan. Civil rights violations were committed on all sides, thousands were killed and the use of child soldiers became widespread.

Is there a “correct” way of filming the Other? Among the films wrestling with the issue, Ulrike Ottinger’s *China. The Arts. The People* (1985) and Chantal Akerman’s *From the East* (1993) seek to capture the texture of everyday life without translating what people are saying. The filmmaker’s (and the audience’s) outsider’s status is made clear, and the human voice becomes an element in an aural symphony that we experience at a sensory, rather than intellectual, level. On the other side of the spectrum, in *Here and Elsewhere* (1976) Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville argue that one way to “represent” the Other in his/her radical otherness is simply to translate what people are saying, rather than projecting our interpretation on the images. In-between, one finds Dutch documentarist Johan van der Keuken’s oeuvre, in which he presented his doubts, as a white man traveling to Third world countries, his hesitations about how to frame the image; often van der Keuken (1938-2001) would immerse himself in a linguistic situation he couldn’t decipher, and had the dialogues subtitled later. And then there are Trinh T. Minh-ha’s experiments, dislocating sound and image, using the voice over not as a “comment” but as a way to further widen the gap between the Other and his/her representation, and, from within the cracks, let a miracle emerge.

Digital media have somewhat altered the rules of the game, as small, portable cameras, creating an apparent intimacy between the filmmaker and the filmed subject, tend to obscure that the real difference is not between cameras of different sizes, but between those who hold the cameras and those whose images are captured by them. In her previous films, such as *Heaven’s Crossroad* (2002, an experimental documentary shot in Vietnam) or *Summer of the Serpent*, 2004, a short narrative) Takesue kept questioning her own desire – or the desire of her fictional protagonists – to “see” another culture, to com-

municate beyond language, to bridge the gap between people coming from different worlds. She is aware of the contradictions and pitfalls such a desire involves, aware of the filmic experiments that preceded hers. In *Where Are You Taking Me?*, by eschewing subtitles, she seems to follow the Ottinger-Akerman model, creating an elegant, sensuous, lovingly woven texture of urban hustle and bustle, faces, bodies at work, at play or in moments of waiting, rest or quiet. Yet, from the get-go, this is a hybrid structure, for Takesue is both inside and outside. A motley of languages is spoken in Uganda, from Lugandan to Swahili to “Ugandan English” (the street vernacular of big cities) but English remains an official language, which, at times, creates a common linguistic ground and situations of shared understanding.

Also, Takesue chose to foreground the role of the camera, which, far from being a simple recording device, is as much the keystone of her apparatus that it was in Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale* (1971): it is inscribed, in abstentia, as the presence of the filmmaker herself, in the composition of the image, as the off-screen space towards which all the lines are converging. Arriving in Uganda with two cameras, Takesue would prefer to use the larger, more visible one, and it becomes part of the reality she captures. Opening with a 2 minute faux “surveillance shot,” she often films at an oblique angle, slightly above or slightly below her subjects, and many of her close-ups are cropped in unusual ways. Yet, Takesue never indulges in outlandish or expressionistic angles. The point of view of the camera, the composition of the image, while daring, surprising or enigmatic at times, always make sense. And we are keenly aware of watching an image recorded through the aesthetic choices of its maker. No illusion of transparency here. No candid camera either. The filmed subjects acknowledge the presence of the camera, return the gaze – seductively, curiously, defiantly – and ask questions: “Where are you taking me?”

The spectator may also wonder: where is this going? We explore the streets, the markets, the shanty towns of Kampala, the

capital. We see young men idle or waiting for work. We catch impressionistic glimpses of a strange upper-class wedding: the radiant bride tries to make eye contact with the groom while, solemn and grim, he steadfastly refuses to look at her. In a makeshift shack with wooden benches, a few kids watch a bad VHS of Bruce Lee's posthumous film, *The Game of Death* (1978) while a man comments, banshi-like, the action in Lugandan, enthusiastically screaming "Bruce Lee!" every minute, like a mantra. Cut to a young fighter, head shaven, training for kickboxing in the street. Turquoise baggy pants, white tank top, small breasts: it's a girl...

Then, as we are starting to get comfortable with the journey, Takesue introduces a rupture. We leave Kampala, drive along a red-brown earth road, and arrive at Hope North School, in the northern part of the country. The camera resumes its observational stance: we attend an English lesson in the classroom, see the kids playing drums, laying bricks, polishing shoes, resting in their dormitories, or three girls learning how to sew on the vintage push pedal Singer machines that can be found everywhere in the Third World... Suddenly Takesue breaks the system she had set up. In a dark, empty room, near a window without pane that opens onto the wilderness, we hear the voice over of a man we have never seen, providing context, history: "We have children who have been affected by the war. Either their parents were killed, or they were child soldiers." The stakes are raised, the perspective shifts. Everything we had seen so far was a shimmering surface covering a troubled reality. While the south of the country has lived in relative peace, in the north, the people who appear in front of the camera are, to one degree or another, recovering from a bloody civil war.

And how do you deal with these young people who were in the eye of the storm, who saw and did what they shouldn't have? Takesue modifies her shooting strategy, starting on the blurred close-up of an older student, who gradually comes into focus. He is silent. A sharp

cut brings us to a panning from right to left – an extreme close-up on the eyes of another student. Another cut articulates a forward-tracking medium shot of a very young girl. Then we come back to the first young man, whose face is wrinkled and marked. His lips are closed, but his voice is overlaid over the image. He remembers walking. And fighting. And killing. The sequence continues with two tight close-ups of the girls’s face and hands, and then three different shots of the second youth. He looks reluctant, uncomfortable in front of the camera. His voice, too, is overlaid over his image. He keeps remembering the sound of gun. And then, in the last shot, he finally speaks in synch sound: “So, where are you taking my story?”

Takesue concludes the film with frontal pictures of kids too young to have been kid soldiers, who playfully address the camera, but also crank their necks to try and see who is behind the apparatus. They are the new generation, savvy about the production of media. They know it’s operated by a person like them – coming from a more affluent part of the world, but like them nonetheless. Maybe one day these kids will get a DV camera and start recording things around them. This final sequence is introduced by another long take, almost 3 minute long, as an echo to the one that opened the film. This time we are in the countryside, by the side of a road cut from the frame, and we see people on bicycle, on foot, endlessly going in either direction, alone or in small groups, women carrying small babies wrapped in cloth. The camera is static, the people are moving, they disappear off-screen, paying perfunctory attention to the camera. Where are they taking us indeed? Immobile on our seats, we can simply watch Ugandans go by, toward an uncertain future. And, if we have let Takesue take us along on her journey, we have made a tiny step toward the bridging of the gap between “them” and “us.”

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