Reel-Unreel

An analysis of the artwork by Francis Alÿs, Reel-Unreel, (2001), Adam Art Gallery

The artwork Francis Alÿs, *Reel-Unreel*, (2001), Adam Art Gallery is presented as a 20-minute film, projected onto a wall in a medium sized room at the Adam Art Gallery. It is the single artwork shown at the gallery by the Belgian born, Mexico City-based artist, Francis Alÿs. It was first shown in 2011 at the Documenta 13 exhibition in Kassel, Germany. *Reel-Unreel* was produced as a collaboration between Alÿs and Afghani architect Ajmal Maiwandi and French filmmaker Julien Delvaux. Thin foam mattresses and pillows are provided in the enclosed interior so as to allude the film is to be viewed in a relaxed reclined position on the floor.

The film opens with kameez clad children playing on the streets of Kabul. The film focuses on one boy unrolling a reel of 35mm film from a red spool along the dusty ground. This film belongs to the group of countless others that were supposedly burned on 5 September 2001 by the ruling Taliban militia when they raided the Afghanistan National Film Archive. However most of the films that were destroyed were prints and many of the original negatives survived, one such film lived on to serve as the main subject of Alÿs' film. The boy unreeling the film mirrors the oftseen children's game of rolling a tyre with a stick. This image of classic childhood amusement is contrasted by the boy unreeling the film that is perhaps not only misplaced in the game but also the earthy setting of the residential area of Kabul. A fervour has emerged on the streets as a crowd of children race excitedly after the fellow sportsman swiftly balancing and unreeling the film as it leaves a continuous roll of iridescent film slithering down the road after him. Shortly after the boisterous children pass the screen, one boy emerges holding a corresponding reel of film. He is following the children, rewinding the unreeled film onto a black spool. Loud laughter, automobile clatter, helicopter reverberation and goat noises are the soundtrack to this film. This process of destruction and preservation travels throughout the residential streets to the bustling market place, finally to a hill that overlooks the Afghan city. The film reaches a climactic end when the sound of the unreeling film gets noticeably louder and the first boy rolls the reel through a street side fire. The film finally is broken. The film is then pushed over the steep hill as the child who worked to keep the film in tact watches over.

The film is figurative of Afghanistan and the way it is perceived by the West. Alÿs is a western artist portraying the city of Kabul through the medium of film. 35mm film was chosen as the subject of the video to remind the viewer we are viewing the city, its inhabitants and the narrative through a lens, and there are limitations in our understanding by what is presented to us. In a beginning scene, a boy who is examining the film explains, "All these people are locked up," this is Alÿs' voice to the viewers through the wisdom and commonsense of a child that a series of still shots moving rapidly to project a moving image on a screen is not real. It is not real in the sense that the portrayal in the film is the true experience of the subjects. The entire 20-minute artwork serves the purpose of this message; even the title is referring to the real-unreal depictions of Afghanistan in western media. The narrative is also analogous to Alÿs' view of the reaction of Afghani culture to the West's arbitrary possession of their identity. The boy rewinding the film to preserve the fabric of the documented Afghan culture represents Afghanistan's rebuilding of a war-torn nation. The West however continues it's dominating position and is either unaware or uncaring of the desire of Afghanistan to reclaim its identity. The location of Kabul is carefully considered to portray the presence of the West. Three decades of war in recent history has embedded the presence of the West into the landscape of Kabul and is heard through military helicopters. An underlying theme of the film is Western Imperialism, from within the film content and also in the context of the viewer experiencing the film. The perseverance of the child rewinding the film to capture what has been discarded before him is Alÿs showing that the Afghanistan nation is aware of its position and its lack of power to control how the world perceives them. This view however is heaped with irony as Alÿs, a western artist, is depicting an Afghani response or feeling.

The context in which the viewer experiences the artwork adds another depth of meaning to Alÿs' film. Watching the film lying luxuriously on a carpeted floor in the Adam Art Gallery one is aware that even in an immersive experience such as film we are not the owners of the experience we are viewing. The style the artwork is presented in is light and infectiously joyous. The use of children to deliver the message behind the film is not used to evoke a sense of guilt in the viewer, but it speaks a kind and gentle lesson and ultimately seems hopeful. Not in the sense that the boy rewinding the film can ever reclaim what was lost, but what he has, he can work with.

Nalin Samountry