“Okinawa: The Afterburn”—Victor’s Images, Words That Do Not Form Words

Ishizaka Kenji

(Editor’s note: The documentary “Okinawa: The Afterburn” [Okinawa Urizun no Ame] premiered at Iwanami Hall in Tokyo on June 20, 2015, and has since opened at theaters across Japan. There will be a special screening of the film with English narration and subtitles at Hibiya Convention Hall in Tokyo on October 6, 2015. Additional information is available here.)

Director John Junkerman’s “Okinawa: The Afterburn” is an extremely rational documentary film. This is a virtue shared by the director’s “Power and Terror: Noam Chomsky in Our Times” (2002) and “Japan’s Peace Constitution” (2005), in which, via the maker’s level-headed processing, viewers are able to face many problems and encounter many clues they are given to think through on their own. At 148 minutes, this is a long film. But it is carefully arranged in four, roughly chronological parts—1) The Battle of Okinawa; 2) Occupation; 3) Violation; and 4) To the Future—that sustain interest and can be watched through without ever feeling long. I would like to explore those four parts with particular attention to aspects of the film that deliver a strong impact.

Part 1: The Battle of Okinawa (1)

Words that do not form words

At 60 minutes, the longest section, Part 1: The Battle of Okinawa, is devastating. Okinawa is placed in historical context, beginning with Matthew Perry’s arrival there in the mid-19th century. We learn that already then the United States perceived this small island in East Asia as a keystone. Then the course of events that began with the American landing on the main island of Okinawa on April 1, 1945, the fierce battle that followed, the end of organized combat on June 23, and Japan’s defeat on August 15 is told through interviews with participants from both sides of the battle and archival footage. The testimony of those who survived the extreme horror of the Battle of Okinawa is of course invaluable, but I had three additional thoughts.

American soldiers take cover behind a shișā in Tomori, during the final days of the Battle of Okinawa, June 1945

The first thing to note is that Junkerman handles the narration himself. Having lived in Japan for many years, his Japanese is quite fluent, but we can tell from slight intonations and such that it is a foreigner speaking. This delicate texture helps produce what I call the “level-headed” feel of the film and, distinct from news accounts of Okinawa, highlights the maker’s connection to Okinawa, which in turn
can be shared by the viewer. The treatment of narration in documentaries is a very interesting subject. Filmmakers such as Ogawa Shinsuke and Hara Kazuo often did their own narration, in order to convey to the viewer the temperature of the moment at the time of the filming. In contrast, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, in his series of films on Minamata, often used the drier narration of a professional (Ito Soichi) to intentionally create a certain distance between the viewer and the film. Junkerman’s narration occupies yet a different space from these filmmakers, that is the quality of “an American director narrating,” “fluently,” “in Japanese.” This provides the keynote for this film.

A second thought regards words that do not form words, specifically in a scene where former US Army sergeant Leonard Lazarick appears. A 21-year old soldier at the time, Lazarick describes how his unit killed four Okinawans (including a baby) who were moving about at night despite orders that prohibited such movement. When asked, “Did you tell stories about Okinawa after you got back?” he responded, “Not at first. Not at all. I had nobody to talk to. And some of the things that I would talk about were somewhat unbelievable. Who would believe that we did some of the things that we did?” Watching this exchange, I was reminded of several scenes in Claude Lanzmann’s “Shoah” (1985). That film is constructed from a massive amount of testimony from perpetrators, victims, and observers regarding the Nazi concentration camps, but regardless of their position, all speak with one voice: their experiences in the concentration camps “cannot be put into words,” “cannot be expressed with words,” “cannot be told.” This aspect of “Shoah” is often discussed when considering what is known as “the impossibility of representation” in film. Or, in Hara Kazuo’s “The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On” (1987), which deals with starvation and cannibalism among Japanese soldiers in New Guinea, when the main character Okazaki Kenzo visits former officers and tries to force them to acknowledge the truth, what slips from their mouths consistently are the words, “I cannot put that into words."

The horrific scenes of war epitomized by the atomic bomb and the Holocaust are monstrosities that have surpassed the ability of words to express. People can only utter, paradoxically, the words “that cannot be put into words.” This film, for example, runs into that wall in Lazarick’s testimony, and faces the problem of how to proceed from there with film images. In the case of “Shoah,” absolutely no archival images were used; only the testimony of survivors, and the camera’s long, intense gaze upon the sites of the camps and places corpses were buried, where now nothing but silence spreads. Words that do not form words, and silent landscapes where no trace of the past remains. It is a method of evoking historical reality through the accumulation of “absences.” “The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On” likewise uses no documentary images from the past; Okazaki travels around Japan, visiting widely dispersed survivors, and the camera simply follows that activity as it unfolds in the present tense. These films, in their attempt to visualize things “that cannot be put into words,” deliberately avoid archival images and instead stake everything on words and images of “the present.” But “Okinawa: The Afterburn” chose a different route. Especially in Part 1: The Battle of Okinawa, contemporary documentary images of the battle are introduced in abundance, creating an overwhelming impression and aiding our understanding.

Part 1: The Battle of Okinawa (1)

The victors possess the images

Turning to my third point, the biggest impact the film carried for me was actually provided by these archival images. Again, in a separate dimension from the brutal and wretched scenes they depict, much of the footage that is
obviously taken by the American side, while perhaps slightly faded, is truly vivid color film. Even the numerous black-and-white photographs that appear in the film, taken by then-combat photographer W. Eugene Smith, are vivid photographs that exhibit a certain aesthetic sense. Would it be fair to say I was amazed by these “splendid” archival images? When Ozu Yasujiro, stationed in Singapore during the war, saw the Technicolor “Gone with the Wind,” it is said that he knew Japan would lose the war, and perhaps I could say I had a similar feeling.

Part 2: Occupation

Paired with images of resistance

Part 2: Occupation is interesting in the distinctive way it fixes its perspective on the postwar. The epoch does not begin with the end of organized combat in Okinawa on June 23, 1945, or with the Japanese defeat on August 15; instead, the Occupation is shown to begin immediately after the landing on April 1, when the American forces began to implement their occupation policies. Before long, base construction intensifies within the framework of the Cold War, and the outbreak of the Korean War accelerates the transformation of the bases into a permanent presence. Meanwhile, the people of occupied Okinawa begin fighting the anti-base struggle.

Here again people from a variety of positions are interviewed, and the gaps between their perceptions of the times they lived through are thrown into relief. For example, former US Army photographer David Crews recounts how, when overseas duty assignments were announced at his training camp in 1970, a “V” next to one’s name meant an assignment to Vietnam, which he wanted to avoid at all costs. In contrast, his image of Okinawa brought to mind an upbeat commercial jingle, which he sings as “Okinawa’s really great, Okinawa just can’t wait. Hurray for Okinawa!” Once on Okinawa, he found it a paradise, where he could indulge in the pleasures of the pubs on
and around the bases. “There were definitely two different universes,” the world in and around the bases, and the Okinawan world beyond, another veteran remarked.

An activist attaches ribbons of protest to the barbed wire at Futenma Marine Corps Air Station, Okinawa.

In his youth, Chibana Shoichi, now a Buddhist priest in Yomitan who is well known for having burned a Japanese flag that was flying over the 1987 national athletic meet in Okinawa, saw Japan as a fabulous country. “There was the Japanese Constitution, Japan did not fight wars, it did not have a military. And it guaranteed fundamental human rights. It had developed economically.” But this illusion was destroyed when control over Okinawa reverted to Japan in 1972, leaving the bases intact.

Part 2 also uses archival footage, but it comes from Higashi Yoichi’s “The Okinawan Islands” (1969) and Nishiyama Masahiro’s “Yuntanza Okinawa” (1987), in which Chibana Shoichi also appears. In contrast to the footage used in Part 1, which was filmed by Americans, these films came from the Japanese side and documented the opposition and resistance to the occupation. Those who had no images now came to possess them. “The Okinawan Islands” is an invaluable film that was made before Okinawa’s reversion to Japan. The scene included in the new film juxtaposes an anti-base narration against the thundering roar of jets at an airbase, and a spirit of resistance suffuses Higashi’s entire film. For its part, “Yuntanza Okinawa” was the first film to fully explore the mass suicide that took place in the Chibichiri-gama cave in Yomitan, an incident that had remained hidden through decades of the postwar. It is an important work that deserves to be seen again, in conjunction with the current film.

Part 3: Violation

Extending the problem of sexual violence

Both the theme and its thorough treatment make Part 3: Violation a highlight of the film, along with Part 1. It not only takes up the sexual violence that Okinawa women have suffered as a result of the existence of the bases, it also presents an interview with a perpetrator. However, the story of how the former Marine Rodrico Harp, who served a prison sentence for conspiracy to rape, got swept up by the recklessness of his friend, the main perpetrator, is remarkably frivolous and disappointing. It harkens back to the description in Part 2 of how the bases on Okinawa were perceived as “paradise.” The delusion that outside of the bases is a heaven where every desire can be fulfilled, and a discriminatory view of the Okinawans—where these two intersect is where sexual crimes proliferate. But Junkerman extends the issue to the interior of the American bases, where American female soldiers are victims of sexual violence committed by their fellow male soldiers. This expansion of the problem consciousness of sexual violence is not something that has been seen in previous films on Okinawa, and in the entire film it is this Part 3 where Junkerman’s individuality is most in evidence.
Antibase activist Ashitomi Hiroshi speaks to a crowd, estimated at 22,000, that surrounded the National Diet building in Tokyo on September 12, 2015, in opposition to the new base at Henoko.

Part 4: To the Future, focused on the movement opposing the planned move of a military base to Henoko, is a short, 15-minute epilogue that may leave some unsatisfied. But it is perhaps best to supplement this film by watching Mikami Chie’s “We Shall Overcome” (2015), which follows closely that tense situation. This film provides a wide-angle long view of the 70-year postwar span, while “We Shall Overcome” zooms in for close-ups of a focalized situation that is changing by the hour. Transcending differences in style, the two films ask us, “What have the 70 years of the postwar meant for Okinawa?”

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