Misa Shikuma brings us reviews from the 2020 Sundance Film Festival

By Misa Shikuma
IE Contributor

A Thousand Cuts

USA, Philippines 2020

Dir. Ramona S. Diaz

Seasoned documentary filmmaker Ramona S. Diaz spent months on the ground in the Philippines covering the beginning of upstart Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, marked by violence, disinformation and an alarmingly dismissive attitude toward the free press. Weaving together the stories of key figures in Filipino politics and media, *A Thousand Cuts* is a taut, riveting exploration of what happens when democracy and the truth come under attack by the authorities that society is supposed to trust. For those of us living in the shadow of the Trump administration, it's serves as both wake-up call and battle cry.

In 2016, Duterte comes to power on a platform of vengeance, promising to put a bloody stop to the nation's drug trade. Within hours of his inauguration, the first bodies are discovered on the streets. No vetting or due process; just street-side executions. Leading independent news site Rappler immediately begins covering the deaths, questioning whether the president is waging a war on drugs, as he's promised, or merely a war on the poor. The company and its founder and CEO, Maria Ressa, become targets.

Meanwhile, Duterte appoints internet-famous dancer-slash-singer Mocha Usun to what is essentially a government PR position, taking advantage of her millions of followers. Usun's blog serves as an echo chamber, amplifying the false accusations leveled by Duterte's team and encouraging right-wing trolls to come out of the woodwork, countering and trying to discredit Rappler's work at every turn.

Ressa, part of the group of journalists honored by Time for Person of the Year 2018 for their work combating fake news, retains martyr-like composure despite all the obstacles thrown her way, including being charged with ridiculous lawsuits on Duterte's orders; getting arrested at the Manila airport upon returning from an international trip; dealing with trolls showing up at the Rappler office (ironically in a bid to prove that they weren't trolls).



A Thousand Cuts by Ramona S. Diaz, an official selection of the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. **Courtesy of Sundance Institute.**

At almost two hours long, *A Thousand Cuts* provides an in-depth look at what publications like Rappler face under Duterte's leadership, whilst offering nuanced observations on other topics like sexism. For example, conservative internet trolls coined the hashtag #presstitutes in an effort to mock Rappler's status as a female-founded and led company (the majority of the staff are women, based on footage filmed inside the office). Usun candidly addresses the double-standards that she faces, which are eerily similar to the ways that the media has treated the young women employed by the Trump administration; focusing on their physical appearances rather than their accomplishments and experience. Usun has a university degree and dropped out of medical school to pursue a career in entertainment, yet the public treats her as though she's an airhead. (Although, given that her blog is a hub for disinformation, it's hard to extend much sympathy).

Cut from the same cloth as our own president, Duterte jokes about rape and the size of his penis in public speeches. The two leaders share a rhetoric of fear, hate and chauvinism, attempting to promote transparency by consenting to interviews, only to behave in a manner both condescending and volatile, particularly when their fragile male egos feel threatened. And yet, both men miraculously retain some level of popularity among their respective constituents.

In a world where incendiary messages rife with lies spread quicker and more widely than the fact-checked truth, people like Ressa and the Rappler team are even more crucial to maintaining balance in a democratic society. Like the fearless heroine at the center of the film, Diaz forces us to question our own complicity, be it retweeting a bit of fake news or inaction in the face of wrongdoing.

"First they came for the journalists," says Ressa riffing on Martin Niemöller's famous WWII poem during a speech. "We don't know what happened after that."

Ask No Questions [Slamdance]

Dir. Jason Loftus & Eric Pedicelli

Canada, 2020

Premiering at the Slamdance Film Festival (founded by filmmakers who were rejected by Sundance but has grown into its own entity over the years), *Ask No Questions* revisits a widely broadcasted incident, crucial to the Chinese government's crusade against Falun Gong, with fresh eyes and evidence. From the filmmakers whose previous documentary *Human Harvest* lifted the curtain on China's shady organ transplant industry, this latest documentary plumbs the depths to which the Chinese government will go in order to retain centralized control.

If you live in a major city with a Chinese embassy, you've probably seen the protestors with banners proclaiming "Falun Gong is good" or something similar camped outside its doors. You've probably also been too preoccupied with getting your travel visa approved or passport renewed to pay them much attention. Little do urban passersby know, these peaceful activists are showing their support for a heavily persecuted group that continue to endure gross violations of their human rights.

A spiritual form of self-care that emphasized meditation, light stretching and movement, Falun Gong steadily rose in popularity during the 1990s. By the end of that decade practitioners numbered in the millions, causing the communist party to feel threatened even though, at that point, a number of party members were followers themselves. Not to mention that Falun Gong is neither religious nor political.

In 2001, a small group of people self-immolated in Tianenmen Square, and the Chinese State TV immediately put footage of the event on blast, claiming that they were all Falun Gong practitioners. To a shocked public, the incident blended seamlessly with the government's smear campaign, but to those who actually understood Falun Gong, it made no sense.

Sundance reviews: Continued on page 29...

...SAAFF FAQs: Continued from page 27

Can I go to the Opening Night Party if I can't make it to the Opening Night Film?

Yes! If you can't make it to *Seadrift* but want to attend the party, doors for the party at Washington Hall will open at 9:00 pm. You can purchase tickets for just the party at the door or online at https://seattleaaff.org/2020/special_events/opening-night-party/

Are the theaters ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible?

Northwest Film Forum and Washington Hall are ADA accessible. Broadway Performance Hall has an elevator currently under repair with no clear date set to finish repairs.

Are there discounts at neighboring businesses for festival attendees?

Yes, see us at guest services for the list of businesses offering discounts or check the website.

Aside from screening films, what else is going on at SAAFF?

We'll have the lobby open for the duration of the festival, where you'll find:

- 2020 Census registration
- Panels
- Guest services
- Merchandise
- Step & Repeat photo area
- Community resource table with information about Seattle-area Asian American organizations

And don't forget the all ages Closing Night Party at Rhein Haus that is free for all to attend!

Is there food available at the theaters?

Food and drinks are not allowed inside the theatre at Broadway Performance Hall. At Northwest Film Forum, there is a concession stand and beer is available for purchase. Many restaurants are within walking distance of the theaters.

How can I contact SAAFF?

Find us on social media!

- Facebook.com/seattleaaff
- Twitter.com/seattleaaff (#SAAFF2020)
- Instagram.com/seattleaaff/ (#SAAFF2020)
- Youtube.com/seattleaaff

Email questions to info@seattleaaff.org, or message us on Facebook or Instagram. Also visit us at guest services in the lobby of the theaters during festival hours. ■

...Sundance reviews: Continued from page 28

While *Ask No Questions* offers compelling evidence that the whole incident was staged by the state-run media, the true heart of the story is Chen Ruichang, a television network employee at the time and Falun Gong practitioner. Like those working for the government and its subsidiaries, Chen was asked to denounce Falun Gong. When he refused, he was sent to a "reeducation center," a nightmarish 1984-like facility whose goal was to forcibly retrain the mind to reject Falun Gong. Some did not survive the center, or would later die in the initial raids that the government conducted to purge practitioners from society.

As China continues to ascend on the global stage, films like *Ask No Questions* become more significant because if world leaders aren't held accountable for their actions, we risk making the kind of dystopia that normally exists only in fiction a reality.

Be Water

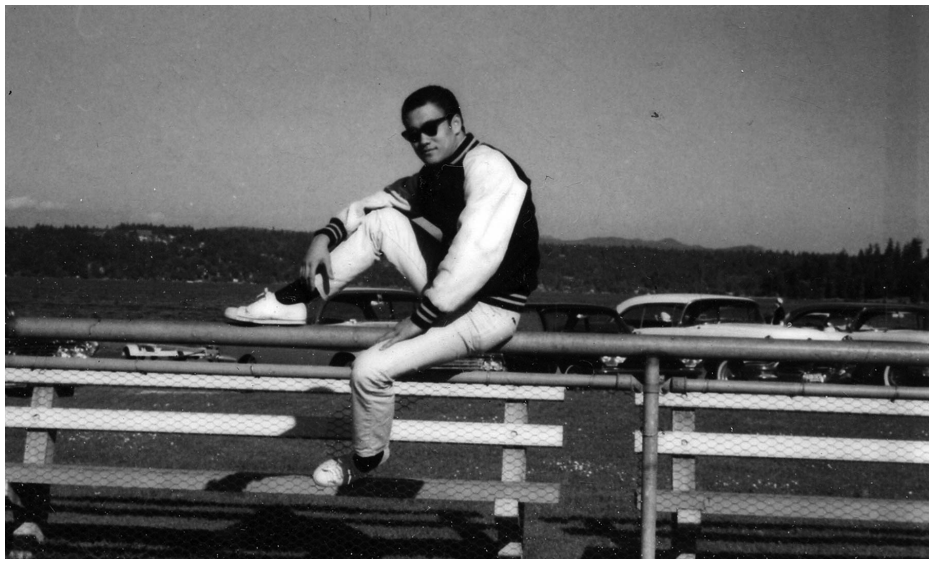
Dir. Bao Nguyen

USA, 2020

Premiering in the U..S Documentary competition, Vietnamese American director Bao Nguyen's *Be Water* is an intimate and timely origin story of martial arts icon Bruce Lee.

Born in San Francisco to a famous Chinese opera performer, Lee was raised in Hong Kong and returned to the U.S. as a teenager. Throughout his life and career, as he worked on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, he never felt like he completely belonged in either place. Friends and early students of his in Seattle, where he first developed his school and practice, recall having to teach him how to act on the streets. Later on, as an adult trying to break into the Hong Kong film scene, his wife Linda Lee Caldwell noticed how the local film crews were initially skeptical of him, even though he had been a child actor there. For Asian Americans today, it's a familiar portrait of otherness.

While Lee is a household name, perhaps few realize that it was only at the end of his career that he achieved just a fraction of the recognition that he has today. Be Water, whose title is an homage to Lee's philosophy, unpacks in painstaking detail just how much the late star had to hustle to get the gatekeepers of the entertainment industry to give him a chance. And



Be Water by Bao Nguyen, an official selection of the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. **Courtesy of Sundance Institute.**

even then, he was never regarded as being on equal footing as his costars. Sure, the studio executives were impressed by his physicality and athleticism, but his accent precluded him from receiving more speaking roles, and he experienced significant pay discrepancy particularly on the show The Green Hornet.

In today's world, where representation is a constant buzzword, Lee's struggles in the industry are a cautionary tale for how much further we have to go. Asian men are still one of the most underrepresented groups in mainstream media, and it's deeply rooted in our cultural DNA. From the time of pro-Chinese Exclusion Act propaganda, Asian men have been portrayed as caricatures all the way up to and including Mickey Rooney's godawful role in Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961), which is essentially the live-action version of the racist cartoons that have existed for decades. Asian men, in other words, solely existed to be the comic relief; or, more specifically, the butt of the joke. Not to mention that they weren't even played by real Asians. And while Asian women have long been eroticized and fetishized, roles for Asian men have historically been stripped of any semblance of sexual appeal. In recent years we've been given Keanu Reeves, Daniel Dae Kim, Randall Park and Steven Yeun; but the list is conspicuously short.

As Lee's daughter, Shannon, says in the film, her father failed to appreciate (or perhaps chose to ignore) just how much of a "behemoth" this prejudice in the industry was. Regardless, his frustrating experience in Hollywood bolstered him to return to Hong Kong in 1971 where, after some initial obstacles, he completed four feature films in two years: *The Big Boss* (1971), *Fist of Fury* (1972), *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) and *Enter the Dragon* (1973). These films catapulted his reputation to unprecedented heights in Asia and beyond but, unfortunately, he didn't live to see the fruits of his legacy.

In her introduction before the film's screening, Sundance's director of programming, Kim Yutani, noted how pleased she was at the "high concentration of Asians" in the audience. We probably showed up for a myriad of reasons, but, deep down, we all crave the opportunity to see a hero on the big screen that looks like us.

Vivos

Dir. Ai Weiwei

Germany, Mexico, 2019

In his latest documentary feature, artist and filmmaker Ai Weiwei turns his gaze on an incident that sparked international outrage when it occurred in 2014 but has since largely been forgotten by the international community. Focusing on the families of the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College students attacked in Iguala that fateful day in September, *Vivos* captures the pain of the parents and siblings who have had to live in limbo without their loved ones nor any answers regarding their fate.

"I don't have much purpose in my life," confessed the director during the post-premiere Q&A, in reference to his career as a visual artist.

Perhaps that helps explain his documentary work in the past several years. Both *The Rest* (2019) and *Human Flow* (2017) examined the global movement of refugees. When asked what drew him to this particular story, which is so enmeshed in Mexico's sociopolitical climate, Ai stated that he very much related to what the families and the Mexican public are going through, having grown up in communist China; the constant fear and uncertainty coupled with mistrust of the government and military.

Vivos spends much of its time entrenched with the families of the victims, comprised mostly of poor and indigenous farmers. Tearfully, parents recount how their sons had enrolled at Ayotzinapa in order to try to improve their families' lives. But instead, while traveling through a nearby town, their buses were attacked - six students died, a dozen injured, and 43 disappeared. Several years on, the victims' families' sadness has only transformed into despair as the lack of answers and accountability have denied them closure and an opportunity to move on. Some try to maintain optimism that the missing students are still alive. They are emotionally paralyzed, for with no bodies they cannot grieve fully.

While initially the Mexican government cooperated with third-party investigators into the incident, once it became clear that the official account of what happened (that the 43 were incinerated by cartels and dumped into a mass grave) was false, those who sought the truth found themselves completely shut out. In the aftermath of the lies, the families have mobilized, staging protests, hunger strikes and sit-ins but, thus far, to no avail. It's not lost on anyone that were they not a rural and marginalized community, the outcome would probably be different. Perhaps the attack would not have happened at all.

Although Ai brings in a few experts to provide context to the current state of affairs in Mexico, the central focus is the families, whose steadfast heroism is even more heartbreaking in the face of the government's apathy. The film's tone is surprisingly muted, given the director's reputation for outspokenness, but in discussing the drug trade it is difficult not to feel complicit as an American. After all, many experts agree that the most likely scenario is that the students accidentally boarded buses that were meant to deliver heroin to the border.

Quietly compelling, *Vivos* is a testament to love and faith, but whether those virtues are enough to prevail against deeply rooted corruption remains to be seen. ■



Still from *Ask No Questions*



Vivos by Ai Weiwei, an official selection of the Documentary Premieres program at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival**. Courtesy of Sundance Institute | photo by Ai Weiwei.**