

Mark of Our Desertion

Today I stumbled upon Seoul Museum of Art (서울시립미술관) located near the Seoul City Hall (시청). There was a contemporary art exhibition happening. Although I usually am highly against the postmodernity of contemporary art, my mood that rode the weather lead me into the exhibition. There was a video art by a French artist Pierre Huyghe called *Untitled (Human Mask)*.

If you have been keeping up with my writing you would know that I really have nothing to say about video art, for I don't acknowledge it as cinema. *Untitled (Human Mask)*, however, was different. It was the first cinematic video art that I have seen. That is, the artist has the cinema sense in terms of utilizing the ability of the camera to establish a relationship between the subject and the frame rather than utilizing the camera as a device that simply makes a statement. In most cases, video is used by artists to make statements and nothing more. Many artists see video as a medium of documentation but not much more than that. On the other hand, it is great to have witnessed a work of art by Pierre Huyghe that pushes video art into the realm of cinema. I personally highly recommend the film to anyone.

Untitled (Human Mask) is based on a monkey that wears a human mask and survives on its own in a restaurant devastated by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster that occurred in 2011. The monkey was supposedly trained to work as a waitress.

The film opens with the frame roaming around the abandoned grounds of Fukushima. The frame is voyeuristic. It objectively observes but does not, and cannot, intervene with the situation that it sees. Such is the intrinsic "godly nature" of the camera that I have been mentioning throughout my writings. The city remains deserted as the root of yet another nuclear tragedy in the Asia Pacific, and within the core of it all survives a monkey without any external support.

The monkey resembles a child trapped in a room who has only his/her imagination to play with. The close-ups of the objects around the monkey implode into the mind of the occupant. The handheld camera queues itself to follow the actions of the monkey in case the monkey acts spontaneously. However, the monkey remains calm, for it plays with its head – its thoughts. Each cut in the film is motivated by the subtle body movements of the monkey that are metaphorically connected with the objects within the restaurant. For instance, the monkey's swinging foot is matched with the typical cat machine that swings one of its arms that can be seen in many restaurants in East Asia. The environment dictates the livelihood of the monkey, as it is the same for humans. The monkey in the film is not only an animal that wears a human mask. Rather, the monkey has become human through the means of a disaster. This is not to say that the nuclear radiation has altered the monkey's behaviors. It is to say that the desertion has provoked the monkey's conscious to recognize its psyche.

Perhaps the human psyche too is the mark of our desertion.

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