

The eye above the well



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R. Preeti 6/5/2007 The Eye Above The Well The documentary film, 'The Eye Above The Well' is essentially a narration of an Indian Folktale, by photographer-filmmaker Johan van der Keuken. It is a simple tale of a man tied to the branch of a tree above a well. It speaks about his agony, helplessness and his horrifying experience, hanging suspended above a well that was well inhabited by snakes. However, even under such terrible conditions of misery and torture, the man tries his best and reaches a blade of grass nearby, that was laden with a drop of honey! His ability to enjoy the beauty and creation bestowed by the Almighty, amidst misery labels him a paradoxical happy-go-lucky, go-getter fatalist!

a. What do you think " Eye Above the Well' is trying to do on its own terms, and how is this film about itself as film

The documentary film is a figurative description of the Third World countries. The film is set in the Indian state of Kerala and the story essentially brings to the forefront, the trauma and horrifying experiences that the Third World countries have been undergoing. The man suspended from the tree, above a well is the representative of these countries and the well represents the profound misery they have been subject to. However, what is refreshingly different is the man's attempt to reach out and taste the drop of honey on a blade of grass. This is symbolic of the attempt of the Third World and the citizens of these countries, who, amidst poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease and ignorance try to attain the innocent bliss of living each day and of enjoying God's creation, nature, beauty and the very meaning of life. They search and find happiness in the little things that their lives offer, without fretting.

The film also brings to light the cultural richness and heritage of one such

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country-India. In spite of being one of the victims of colonisation, India has risen, striving to make a mark and has been doing greatly well, at that. The man is symbolic of this 'never-say-die' attitude and the ability to persevere to attain what lies within one's reach, which is exactly what these countries have been doing. In addition to this, the documentary also establishes the need to look beyond trauma and problems, that are but a transient phase of life. One must learn to appreciate the very opportunity to live and take on a more permanent and wholesome view on life. Thus, the documentary does possess a deeper meaning of its superficial content. It attempts to transmit a moral through its rich visual treat---that one must look for happiness amidst sorrow and for hope in despair, since life is what one perceives!

b. How is it about the acts of looking or, another way, what do you make of the camera work and/or the shot compositions

The documentary filmmaker in question, Johan van der Keuken was a photographer and therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the documentary is a visual treat to watch. One of the highlights of the documentary film, is the lack of background narration. The viewer is left to understand and gather the intrinsic message of the film, by himself.

However, the visuals and the composition of shots, that complement the motive of the filmmaker help the audience comprehend and appreciate the film, absolutely. The shots that transmit the temporary and transient phases of life are captured in a hazy, dusty and vague manner. They relate that life is one bumpy ride, but one needs to get beyond it, to know the very meaning of existence. Besides this, they also stand testimony to the fact that the Third World countries have been resurrecting from the deep destruction that they have been subject to-the unfairness of the whole situation.

The camera assumes lucidity and flowing movement, when the filmmaker captures the rural parts of the movie. Contrastingly, he chooses to cut across zap through the urban city scenes, which are symbolic of life in the urban parts. Here, the theme of the growing Globalisation making its way into the Third World countries is evident. In addition to this, the camera captures the two varied settings of urban and rural lives differently, in an attempt to highlight the differentiation between the Developed and the Developing or the Under-Developed World. The co-existence of both these settings in the same state provides us the notion regarding the coexistence of utmost development on one hand and struggle to keep up with life on the other. The visuals of the passage of tradition, down the line by Kathakali dance teacher to his pupils and the scene pertaining to the money-lender collecting money from his debtors are all vocal about the richness of culture in these countries, particularly India and the contrasting poorness in the transient and material possessions of life, that leads them to be discriminated by the rest. Thus, Johan van der Keuken manages to capture the very essence of his powerful script with his beautiful and thought-provoking visual camera captures.

References

'The Eye Above The Well', by Johan van der Keuken.

Website: <http://www.filmref.com/notes/archives/2006/04/>