



Mika Rottenberg and Mahyad Tousi, *Remote*, 2022, film

confines of her low-key sci-fi apartment. Unoaku lives in mostly content isolation but occasionally seeks distraction online, finding comfort in cutesy nonsensical viral videos. When she becomes hooked on an interactive dog-grooming show, hosted by glamorous influencer Eun-Ji (Joony Kim), Unoaku forges a remote friendship with fellow fans that unexpectedly morphs from virtual into physical connection.

Rottenberg has tantalisingly described *Remote* as 'Jeanne Dielman in the future meets *Being John Malkovich*', a comparison which gestures towards the film's distinctive blend of playfulness, quirk and precision. Borrowing its four-act structure from Kishōtenketsu – a classical Chinese form that allows narrative to escalate across time without forced conflict – the film initially moves with a consciously deliberate pace. Chantal Akerman's feminist classic is referenced in an early sequence in which Unoaku peels potatoes, but, unlike Dielman, who is ultimately doomed by her stultifying routine, Unoaku is able to find escape via technology, which leads her to a kind of techno-magic. A sudden switch at the halfway point signals a turn into mind-bending, Charlie Kaufman-esque territory, introducing us to an array of other women who live alone in apartments around the world and discover that they are connected not just via internet cables, but also by mysterious portals hidden in their homes.

Given the increasingly gloomy narrative around social media, it is refreshing to see Rottenberg and Tousi resist the lure of dystopia and instead offer us a portrait of the near-future casting back to early internet cyber-utopianism. Although there are gentle references here to online bullying and conspiracies, ultimately Unoaku's online encounters provide liberation. This sense of low-key optimism is reflected in the solar-punk aesthetic of Unoaku's apartment, a lightly futuristic blend of bright colours, flashing lights and green foliage, some of which grows directly out of the floor in a mossy carpet which Unoaku lovingly tends to as part of her daily routine.

The irresistible image of springy moss growing out of hard floorboards encapsulates another of Rottenberg and Tousi's central concerns: a preoccupation with touch. *Remote* is obsessed with moments of tactile encounter, particularly the contrast between the impenetrable digital world and the pliable warmth of organic matter. The image of soft flesh meeting hard screens screams David Cronenberg; while Rottenberg and Tousi generally lean towards a light breeziness, there are glimpses of body horror as we hurtle towards a wacky denouement. The discovery of portals (or glory holes), which invite the insertion of a long finger into the unknown, gleefully teeters on the border between ecstasy and ick.

Remote concludes with an animated coda which suggests the breaking open of a new dimension, aesthetically and thematically, for the filmmakers, expanding the film's borders into pure fantasy. Nevertheless, the strongest moments in *Remote* are those in which Rottenberg and Tousi reign in the fantastical sprawl of their imaginations, instead offering semi-futuristic visions which cleave closely to recognisable reality.

A near-climactic sequence in which we see the reality of Eun-Ji's life – an exhausted mother living in a cramped apartment with her baby and elderly father – offers a surprisingly poignant reminder of the disconnect between online and offline personas. Ultimately, scenes like this are where the filmmakers are able to make their most striking impact, offering a relatable meditation on the nature of connection in a world where mounting hurdles – physical, emotional and social – mean that the soothing touch of another human can sometimes feel impossibly out of reach.

Rachel Pronger is a writer and curator based in Berlin. She is also co-founder of the feminist film collective Invisible Women.

Katherine Waugh and Fergus Daily: I See A Darkness

I See a Darkness is the title of not only a new film essay by Katherine Waugh and Fergus Daly but also a multimedia exhibition of supporting research material, both of which were presented at the Photo Museum Ireland in Dublin last November. During the run of the exhibition the gallery hosted a series of events, most notably a symposium, 'Vision Machines: A Shadow Archive', with talks by contributors to the film such as Susan Schuppli and Akira Mizuta Lippit.

Like their previous collaboration on *The Art of Time*, 2009, for their new film essay Waugh and Daly weave together documentary elements such as visits to sites, interviews and troves of archival footage, with essayistic, visual and philosophical considerations to compose a potent mix of images and ideas. The main narrative thread focuses on the legacy of the Irish-born inventor Lucien Bull (1876–1972) and his work on chronophotography, sound ranging and spark illumination, first as assistant to Etienne-Jules Marey at the Marey Institute in Paris and, after Marey's death, as director of the institute. If the development of chronophotography led to the cinematographic, it had applications in other disciplines too. Its focus on capturing the motion of bodies ever more precisely led to high-speed motion-picture photography which can capture up to a million frames per second. The film follows how Bull's work led to Harold Eugene 'Doc' Edgerton's development of the stroboscope, Schlieren



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photography (visualising changes in density) and the rapatronic camera. Edgerton in turn co-operated with Jacques Cousteau to develop deep-sea photography. The Hubble telescope would be another heir to this technology.

There is a deliberate wide-eyedness as we are taken from the Conservatoire des Techniques de la Cinémathèque Française in Paris (the Marey institute having been bulldozed in 1977 to make space for an extension of the Roland Garros stadium) where the director Laurent Mannoni is showing camera prototypes, to the Edgerton Center at MIT where we are treated to a demonstration of Schlieren imaging with a soap bubble and candle. Watching Cousteau trying the first camera models underwater in the swimming pool at MIT, we share a rather familiar sense of wonder and excitement. Yet a darkness is already suggested: there is the little clip that locks the dragonfly's abdomen which is released just in time for the camera to capture its motion, there is the use of Bull's work in sound-ranging to locate enemy artillery during the First World War and, when we watch this extraordinary footage of a bullet going through a bubble of soap at 1,200 frames per second, a rather iconic experiment that will be reproduced with Schlieren imaging in 1974, we cannot ignore its ballistic applications.

These early military uses of Bull's inventions foreshadow the use of Edgerton's rapatronic camera to photograph nuclear explosions within a millisecond of detonation. The atomic sublime of these images is accompanied by Akira Mizuta Lippit reading from *Atomic Light*, 2005: "The 'Enlightenment,'" write Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "is totalitarian". Its ethos "the mastery of nature," requires a seeing subject that stands outside the limit and frames the field of vision.' Or, as Sylvère Lotringer wonders about the atomic bomb: 'the apotheosis of science, the apocalypse of science?'

In the prologue of *I See a Darkness* there is a coyote wandering through the desert we don't know yet to be Death Valley, with a quote from Jean-Christophe Bailly's *The Animal Side*, 2016: "The pensivity of animals is neither a diversion nor a curiosity: what it establishes is that the world in which we live is gazed upon by other beings, that the visible world is shared among creatures and that a politics should be invented on this basis if it is not too late.' It is followed by shots of animals' eyes, a sheep's, a horse's, a dog's, positing another seeing subject.

Thus, after the spectacular images of nuclear explosions conducted at the Bikini Atoll in 1946 and, later, at the Nevada test site the film shows rarely seen footage of the use of animals during these tests; 5,000 animals died or were severely burned during the Crossroads Operation in Bikini. We see sheep and goats standing in for the crew, forced into holding pens on the decks of the warships, a scaled-up cruelty to the clip locking the dragonfly in Bull's early footage. Further footage of pigs being used to test uniforms or monkeys trapped with their eyes held wide to measure the effect of

radioactivity on the pupils makes for disturbing and heartbreaking viewing.



The film's non-linear structure had taken us earlier to the Nevada test site, first through a Google Earth satellite view showing the multiple craters and cave-ins visible on the surface of the desert, the scars of the 928 nuclear bombs that were detonated there between 1951 and 1992, of which 100 were above ground (a printout of this view is part of the exhibition), then through a Google Street View of the entrance of the test site and finally in person with the digital and 16mm footage of Waugh and Daly. A lone Shoshone prayer tree reminds the traveller that the land occupied by the test site is claimed as a traditional homeland for both Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute people. A photograph of that tree along with a copy of Valerie Kuletz's book *Tainted Desert*, 2000, figure at the entrance of the gallery.

Waugh recounts that, as they were driving towards the Nevada test site, a coyote walked right out of the desert in front of their car. She describes the encounter as one of the most amazing of her life. She was thinking of Joseph Beuys's performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974, where the artist shared a room with a coyote - for Beuys the coyote stood for the indigenous people of North America - for three days in a gallery in New York, when deciding to have the 16mm footage of the coyote projected in the Photo Museum gallery. I could not help also thinking of this extraordinary moment in Michael Mann's film *Collateral*, 2004, when, in the LA night, a couple of coyotes nonchalantly cross the boulevard on which the taxi of the protagonists is driving from one carnage to another, leaving Vincent, Tom Cruise's character, quite literally bewildered.

As an epilogue to the film there is an excerpt from Susan Schuppli's *Not Planet Earth*, 2021, shot in the Svalbard arctic archipelago - the film was also introduced by the artist at the opening of the symposium. Schuppli, a member of Forensic Architecture, reflects on modes of witnessing and how to visualise climate change when the melting of the ice is changing the very conditions of vision, while the recording devices we use are themselves complicit with 'the environmental conditions they seek to document and the histories of image extraction that have long colonised our Western imagination'.

I See a Darkness, whose title is inspired by a 2013 song by Billy Prince Bonnie, acknowledges the legacy of Harun Farocki in tracing the connections and complicities between photography, cinema and science within a larger reflection on what constitutes seeing and who is doing the seeing. Like Jonathan Crary, also a contributor to the film, in his latest book, *Scorched Earth* (Reviews AM461), Waugh and Daly remind us how vital the critique of science is: 'In the face of reactionary attacks on all forms of knowledge and learning, our response should not be a mindless celebration of a fairytale account of "science". Such cowardly obsequiousness is an anti-intellectualism as damaging as the right-wing embrace of ignorance.'

Michaële Cutaya is a writer living in County Galway.

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