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### Living Rights, 2004



A compendium of self-contained multicultural stories featuring ethnically, economically, and existentially diverse children, each at the cusp of a pivotal turning point in their young lives, *Living Rights* examines the contemporary relevance - and often divergence - between the humanitarian statement crafted by 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that sought to define and uphold the fundamental living rights of children, and the reality of the lives of these children whom the charter seeks to protect. Article 29, which espouses the "development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential", provides the ideological framework for

the film's first case study: a 16-year-old boy named Yoshi, diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome (a form of autism in which the person possesses normal intelligence, but has cognitive difficulty in interpreting non-verbal communication or understanding non-literal syntax) who has been placed into a special school for the mentally disabled. Juxtaposing Yoshi's candid, confessional-styled, direct address to the camera on why he should be allowed to transfer to a traditional high school with quotidian episodes culled from his personal life, the film (and Yoshi) makes an insightful and compelling argument on inclusion and otherness, and in the process, challenges - and more importantly, inculcates - society's own preconceived ideas of what it truly means to be "normal": his frustrating experiences at school in which he complains of his lack of intellectual challenge (Yoshi has been placed in a class in which some of his classmates exhibit more severe forms of mental disability) and of being over-praised for performing the most mundane tasks; his bouts of melancholia that reveal his low self-esteem (being teased by other children, his feelings of exclusion, his self-consciousness over his imperfections); his articulateness and creativity (particularly in drawing and painting) in expressing his ideas.

An equally compelling second case study involves a 14-year-old Maasai girl named Toti who, at the age of 11, had run away from home after her father promised her in marriage to a wealthy, older tribesman in exchange for a herd of cattle that their growing family needs in order to sustain their livelihood. Now living in a boarding school for runaway children who also fled their villages under similar circumstances of conscience, Toti is eager to reconnect with her family, especially her twin sister who was married off as the tribesman's fourth wife in her place. Filmmaker Duco Tellegen's inspired selection of featuring identical twins provides an incisive dynamic into the ideological gulf that now separates the two sisters. On the one hand is her sister's traditionally-minded arguments on the social role of women, familial (and tribal) obligation, and the meaning of enrichment (most notably, in questioning Toti's motivation for going to school, arguing that one day, she will inherit property once her husband dies, serving as proof that one does not need an education to become wealthy). On the other hand is Toti's own determination to continue with her education in the hopes that she can return to the Maais and help bring about fundamental, humanitarian cultural change to her native community by being able to effectively communicate (and argue) with tribal elders - especially her own father - against deeply entrenched, inhumane customs (most notably, on the continued practices of female circumcision and arranged child marriages). Contrasting Toti's own seemingly limitless future with her sister's resigned, but contented fate, Toti's story is a thoughtful and inspiring account of cultural pride and human enlightenment - a profound transformation enabled by mutual respect, education, open-mindedness, and the singular courage to question.

The third case study centers on an eleven-year-old girl from Chernobyl named Lena who, in the aftermath of the large-scale, uncontained nuclear accident, was forced to leave her hometown for health and safety reasons after the radiation

levels were found to be dangerously high for continued residential occupancy. Separated from her biological mother, she is cared for by her doting aunt, Galah who, despite financial hardship, is able to provide a decent life for her even as continues to be plagued by health problems. One day, a health worker informs Galah that an Italian couple who had once sponsored Lena during a recent international medical visit has expressed their desire to adopt her, and Galah becomes privately torn with wanting Lena to have access to the best health care to treat her condition and an opportunity for a better life, and her own desire to continue to nurture the emotional bond that has developed between them. Rather than imposing her own will on Lena, Galah sets aside her own personal dilemma and steps back from Lena's decision-making process in order to allow her to make up her own mind. Given the inherent limitation of Lena's refusal to discuss matters relating to her personal experience during the Chernobyl disaster as well as her resulting prolonged illness on camera, it is not surprising that the segment is the most clinical, distanced, and emotionally estranged installment of the film. However, while Lena's reticence has unwittingly re-adjusted the thematic focus of the segment from the young girl to her caretaker Gala, what emerges is still the film's underlying core of a child's fundamental - and inalienable - human rights: the right to live in a safe environment, the right to health care, and perhaps most importantly, the right to determine one's own destiny.

Posted by acquarello at June 1, 2005 05:13 PM

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