

Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbours

Karl Holmqvist

"THE DAYS OF THIS SOCIETY IS NUMBERED" is the first "section" of Rirkrit Tiravanija's new documentary film Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbours, which premiered this year as part of the Orizzonti section of the Film Festival in Venice. The very same words with their somewhat scary implication, and irritating grammatical irregularity have already been used by the artist in different color combinations in a number of "newspaper" paintings, and as prints on t-shirts and tote bags. In the present film, it creates a moment of ambiguity as to whether it is the type of rural idyll about to unfold on the screen whose disappearance is imminent, or whether it's about the typically unsustainable, consumerist way of life of many of the moviegoers present in the cinema audience. Or somehow of course possibly both ...

This happens through the realtime edit, often using static shots and ambient sounds, such as birds and insects, and a general tendency to allow for things to last for as long as it takes. But also through the way that some of Lung Neaw's day to day activities come off as infinitely strange and exotic, and at such a remove from a typical Western workday existence as to appear almost like a reverse time travel to a parallel existence, or some kind of post-apocalyptic state.

In the first few scenes, we get to follow Lung Neaw around as he goes grocery shopping early in the morning at the local outdoor market. He chats with the sales people, and inquires about vegetables and spices (supposedly, since it is in Thai and, in this part, also without subtitles). Eventually he will have gathered an impressive amount of small plastic bags and with them in his hands he proceeds to go greet the Buddhist monks who are doing their morning rounds to collect food. He places one small bag in each of the monks' bowls and then he kneels down by the roadside in order to get the monks' blessing in the form of a collective, rhythmic Buddhist chant. This seems to mark the real start of the day as the sound of their voices becomes something of a wake-up call also for the audience. The monks then move on and as the camera zooms in on Lung Neaw standing for a moment by the roadside, it is the first time that we see him in focus properly. His face and posture reveal him to be a bit older lung in fact is an affectionate term meaning uncle, often used for older men in Thailand. At the same time, his dark, reflective eyes are full of expression and his hair has remained thick and black without even a hint of grey.

I have often wondered whether the Buddhist monks' omnipresence and the kind of reverence they get in Thailand as well as other surrounding areas, wouldn't have some effects on the way of life of society as a whole. What the priorities are and what ideal they represent ideals represented in terms of anti-materialism and containment of self. A tradition of sharing and forgiving rather than the more competitive thing you have going in many other parts of the world. With a necessary disillusionment maybe, when say fame and money are not arriving quite as fast and easily as one might have hoped or even expected.

Financial independency of a different order if you will, coming simply from not having very much or even caring about it. Lung Neaw goes through quite a few costume changes in the film, and is even teased about it by a group of women he goes to visit. But his clothes are well worn and clearly part of his person, and would not look right on anyone else. As he leaves his house, there is no need to lock anything, as the neighbors will watch out for it. His first few visits are in the jungle, where he inspects plants and trees and goes barefoot wading through streams. He finally settles down on a bamboo platform in the middle of a clearing and as he lays his head down for a bit of a snooze, we realize that this is just going to take a while. The typical stillness of Thai nature seems to invade the movie theater itself, it's two and a half hours of silence rather than 4'33. A radical slowing down to the point of an anti-film in the manner of *Hurlements en*

faveur de Sade or *Chelsea Girls* where, as a viewer you are very much aware of sitting in a movie theater watching the film, and somehow this becomes as much part of the moviegoing experience as what is actually going on on the screen.

What's particular also, when Lung Neaw returns to the village and goes to see different people, is their unaffectedness in front of the camera. The fact that someone is there filming is even commented upon on a couple of occasions. But then the dialogue goes on to more pressing matters of personal health, inquiring about relatives or environmental worries, such as deforestation and its immediate effect on dramatic weather changes. When no other topics can be found, the dialogue dies down and the protagonists sit quietly together, maybe smoking or listening to the radio until someone comes up with something else. Or else returning to reaffirm something that has been said earlier, lending a certain circularity or spiral, organic movement to the film's narrative development.

The screen's "action" segments are intercut with white-on-black headings spelling out "TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY" or "LESS OIL, MORE COURAGE" or some of the phrases familiar to many of us from titles of exhibitions and works from Rirkrit's earlier practice. This division into parts helps structure the film, but also adds to the sense that it is somehow about other things than simply what is on the screen. The fact that it is filmed outside of Chiang Mai, where the artist has recently made his base, only adds to the urgency of these inquiries. What is a good life, for instance? Where is it and available to whom? Is it individual or quite universal, and what kind of exploitation of one's surroundings does it entail? Through the time that we get to follow Lung Neaw around, we obviously get to know him better, but somehow he also remains equally distant. This would be the accomplishment of the artist filmmaker of course, whose works since twenty-something years have addressed questions of what joins the exotic and the everyday.

The simplicity of eating with one's hands or sitting down directly on the floor-or for that matter, picking condiments for one's meal off of nearby bushes-or drinking water directly from the stream are a type of 'luxuries' that it should be easy enough to make available to all. Yet at this moment in the world, they seem possible for only very few people and in a faraway place.