

Movie Review: The Cats of Mirikitani : Winner of the 2007 Norwegian Peace Film Award.

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The *Norwegian Peace Film Award* (NoPFA) is handed out each year at the *Tromsø International Film Festival* (TIFF). The award was established in 2004 as a cooperation between the TIFF, the *Centre for Peace Studies* at the University of Tromsø and the *NGO Student Network for Peace*. The NoPFA is handed out to films that, according to the award's homepage, "have ambitions to contribute to the expression of thoughts of a better world, films that dare stand up and cry out about abuse, films that confront power structures and oppression mechanisms in the global society."¹ Previous winners include the UK film *In this world* about refugees from Afghanistan; *Beautiful City*, which' thematic is structural violence in Iran; and *Shooting Dogs*, that concerns the genocide in Rwanda. The victory of *The Cats of Mirikitani* constitutes no less than three firsts for the NoPFA: It is the first US' movie, the first documentary and the first film with a female director to receive the award.

⁸² See list of relevant URLs.

Linda Hattendorf's documentary explores the troubled past of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, an old Japanese-American homeless man who makes a living selling his paintings on the streets of Manhattan. Also, it chronicles how Mirikitani and the director herself attempt to amend his present situation, growing closer to each other in the process. The story begins when Hattendorf starts videotaping her encounters with the eccentric painter, fascinated by his art: Almost childlike drawings with stunningly beautiful details. Though the motives vary, the pictures often involve cats, mushroom clouds and an internment camp with an isolated, sharp-edged mountain looming over it.

Two decades without citizenship.

The sudden impact of 9/11 brings the two closer to one another. Following the collapse of the Twin Towers, the streets in which the eighty years old man usually sleeps are enveloped in a toxic cloud. Hattendorf gives Mirikitani shelter in her flat, and subsequently offers him to move in with her for a while, until she's arranged another place for him to stay over social security. This proves more difficult than she expects, as Mirikitani lost his American citizenship during incarceration in a World War II internment camp for Japanese-Americans, and still hasn't regained his social security number.

Though born in Sacramento, Jimmy Mirikitani grew up in Hiroshima and went on to study art there. Japan's fascist turn appalled him so much, however, that in 1938 he moved to his sister in Seattle. At the outbreak of war between the USA and Japan in 1941, Mirikitani and the rest of his family in America were suddenly seen as a security threat, and thus began the nightmare. Mirikitani was separated from his sister and sent to Camp Tule in the middle of the Californian desert. When he was finally released from Tule after the war, all his relatives in Japan had been killed by the US' nuclear bombings.

Despite the war being over, Mirikitani's troubles with the US' authorities didn't end: Along with other stateless Japanese-Americans, he was first sent to another internment camp in Texas and then to a

labour camp in New Jersey. Following this, he attempted to resume his career as an artist, but poverty prevented him. Only in 1959 did Mirikitani get his US' citizenship back, but he never got the government's letter. By 2001 he was living in the streets of New York – but still making art.

Forgotten stories repeat themselves.

Mirikitani's story is in itself a fascinating narrative, but it is all the more interesting because it sheds light on a forgotten part of American history: The plight of a whole generation of Japanese-Americans. As the young Mirikitani attempts to get out of Camp Tule and pursue his career, we come to understand how dreams and life projects were destroyed forever. As Mirikitani and Hattendorf search for his remaining relatives, we learn how families were split up – some never to see each other again. The old man's stories about deicide and death in the camps tell us how persecution and incarceration became the final experience of many innocent people.

But *The Cats of Mirikitani* is not only a movie about past injustice. It keeps one eye constantly turned towards the post-9/11 wars of the USA, the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay in particular. Through associating the WWII internment camps with the human rights' limbo that is Guantanamo, the movie asks an important question: Are not the same mistakes being made all over again?

The Cats of Mirikitani's magnificent portrayal of a largely forgotten part of American history in itself merits an award. But by applying this past tragedy to criticise present practice, an extra dimension is added to the documentary, making it even more important.

Making a difference

The 2007 NoPFA's jury consisted of Palestinian director Rashid Masharawi, American political scientist Michael J. Shapiro and Silje Ryvold, master's student at the Centre for Peace Studies. In the substantiation of their decision, they commented that despite their different backgrounds, vocations and perspectives there was a "strong consensus" around this movie. They emphasised that the film not only

portrays past and present structural violence, but also that "the process of filmmaking in itself made a big difference in peoples' lives."¹ And *The Cats of Mirikitani* really does show a real-life process of healing: Jimmy Mirikitani is given the support he needs to make peace with the past, and the film in itself constitutes a great contribution to his life project: Telling the story of his people's suffering.

Thus, while the film cannot change the past, it did substantially help solve one of the central problems it portrayed – the effects of incarceration and persecution on an individual. That is an accomplishment very few documentaries can boast about.

By its triple focus on past conflict, present conflict and an individual victim, by its importance for spreading information and by its impact on the real world, this film deserves a Peace Film Award like few others I have seen. In fact, this is this kind of film that gives a Peace Film Award something to do. During the 2007 TIFF, the NoPFA hosted a seminar called "Can film make a difference"? I surely hope the debaters waited until after the seminar to see *The Cats of Mirikitani* – because having seen this documentary, the answer to that question is given once and for all.

Relevant URL's

The Cats of Mirikitani:

<http://www.thecatsofmirikitani.com>

The Norwegian Peace Film Award:

<http://uit.no/cps/4439>

The Tromsø International Film Festival:

<http://www.tiff.no>

The University of Tromsø Centre for Peace Studies:

<http://uit.no/cps/>

Student Network for Peace:

<http://uit.no/sn/4783/>

The Jury's Substantiation

<http://uit.no/getfile.php?PageId=3324&FileId=318>





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