

Beth Gage and George Gage (dir.) *From the Ground Up*. Bullfrog Films, 2011.

Anne Makepeace (dir.) *We Still Live Here (Âs Nutayuneân)*. Bullfrog Films, 2010.

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At first glance, one film about widows of 9/11 victims seems far removed from another about the rediscovery of a native language. *From the Ground Up* is an emotional insight into the grieving procedures of four widowed women, coming to terms with the loss of their respective husbands: each one, killed during the FDNY's (Fire Department of New York) salvation operation on September 11th. *We Still Live Here* – or *Âs Nutayuneân* as the subtitle offers (as evidence of Makepeace's commitment to the authenticity of her subject) – follows Jessie Little Doe Baird, quite literally "following her dreams" in order to rediscover and reclaim the language of her ancestry. In a not too far-fetched similarity, a closer look at each film reveals some shared insights into the power of trauma, and of community.

From the Ground Up opens with a montage of quotidian postcards of New York City, continuing the kind of everyday exposures of its urban architecture which have become a prevalent visual response to 9/11 – evidenced throughout multiple *YouTube* tributes. The film is structured as four talking heads discussing their relationships with their lost spouses, recollection of how they heard the devastating news, and what particular action each one undertook as a response to their sudden loss. These incidents are broken up amongst each other – so that one testimony is followed by another – underlining the sense of interdependence and community which pervades the film. Indeed, the film might have quite easily been caught up in Star-Spangled fanfare, glorifying the importance of nation – arguably the sort of reaction the events on that day provoked from the

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majority of Western responses. However, a celebratory nationalism of this kind is as good as absent in *From the Ground Up* – with the one or two exceptions: the flagrant patriotism when U.S. flags dominate the memorial parade; "New York is the kindest place in the world!" one woman exclaims at one point. But scenes of the sort are rare, and really quite disjointed from the rest of the film. *From the Ground Up* does its best work when it sticks as close to each individual situation as possible, rather than attempting to represent each as a New York citizen, or a "proud American", moving together towards a collective goal. Instead, alternative communities – such as the formation of a support group, a library, or a charity – are shown to develop as an almost innate process, during the collective grieving which has been spontaneously imposed on these women.

Filmmaking itself (particularly documentary films), by revisiting the images and sounds of an event, can be effective as a cathartic exercise – for instance brilliantly demonstrated by The Sambath's *Enemies of the People* (2010). This is an unavoidable element in any film that will attempt to deal with the horrors of 9/11. Dispensing with, or refusing to acknowledge the cathartic element in representing traumatic subject matter, has an undeniably lethal effect on the film's success. *From the Ground Up*'s first-hand testimony is a somewhat safe approach to securing this. By homing-in on personal experience of the moment of loss, the moment of explaining that loss to loved ones, the Gages allow for a space of contemplation for each person, whilst at the same time raising the dilemma the filmmaker herself faces when attempting to represent the unrepresentable.

As a small-number of Hollywood films have so far demonstrated (*World Trade Center* by Oliver Stone, 2006); or even more outrageously in *Remember Me* (Allen Coulter, 2010), any attempt at using the event as a vehicle for a narrative framework, results in sheer exploitation and disrespect for the exact people who Beth and George Gage turn their camera on. Instead of dwelling on the torturous spectacle of grief and disaster, these 'real people' find solace in retreading the last steps their loved ones took: such is the emotional route one widow takes a tour-group along. This too is the way Steven's brother has come to terms with his loss: by doing a sponsored run through the tunnel Steven died in. At the film's close, 343 present-day firefighters parade through the same

tunnel, bearing the names of the dead in remembrance. As the interviewees seem at pains – presumably imposed by the film's makers – to suggest, dealing with loss is a "two-steps-forward-one-step-back" journey, best evoked through the revisitings the families undertake, rather than the clichés all too often provided. In sum, *From the Ground Up* contains some excellent moments of unscripted, everyday insight ("Some days it's September 12th") not available elsewhere, inherent in the talking-heads of the everyday person's sentiment. But there is an overbearing heartstring-plucking side to the folksy soundtrack and evocative zooms, perhaps – from a cynical perspective – to suit a certain market.

This is less the case in *Âs Nutayuneân*, which deals with a less documented, more abstract, and perhaps complex form of loss, which results in a fascinating meditation on the possibility of life after death – of language. If the trauma confronted in the first film overtly draws on the allegiance and sentimental capacity of the viewer, the demons which Jessie – the MacArthur Grant winning protagonist – must confront are as much of a mystery to her as they are to the viewer. The film opens with her description of a dream, whereby "familiar looking people" talk an unfamiliar language. This sets her off on a pilgrimage – at once modern and academic, and ancient and spiritual.

Jessie is a linguist, whose passion for language developed from an ancestral fidelity rather than academic ambition. This thirst for expounding the wrong done to her people by English colonizers is presumably the appeal for Marxist linguist, Noam Chomsky (who makes an appearance), whose MIT position led to him crossing Jessie's path. Jessie, like Chomsky, shares a passion for the revolutionary potential of language, and her case – as Chomsky himself states – is particularly rare. It seems that Jessie's achievement is to reinvigorate a community, long-thought dead, by revisiting ancestral scripture in order to restore the Wampanoag language to its people. By breathing life into language – by "welcoming language home" – a people are reborn.

What is perhaps most fascinating about Jessie's task is the method she is forced to undertake. Like the women in *From the Ground Up*, Jessie is forced to return to the scene of atrocity in order

to progress. The Wampanoag bible – forced upon the Wampanoags by the English – is the text from which the bulk of her research is completed. Moments like this bring to mind Jean Rouch's classic of ethnography, *Les Maitres Fous* (1955), which studied the attestation and reclaiming of colonial ills, by the Hauka tribe in Niger. Similarly, *Âs Nutayuneân* confronts the aftermath of empire, showing that whilst inescapable, binaries are reconfigurable.

Makepeace does well to lend a significant amount of time to Jessie's family life, which is integral to her overall mission, as not to lose any of the film's impact to an overly theoretical aloofness. As the narrative builds towards its close, its statements on education, and the importance of children for the future of native cultures, are clearly thrust forward. Jessie's daughter's importance to the Wampanoag's future is highlighted in a way which continues the paradoxical elements of colonial history, broached earlier. Will this child face the alienation of her peers in order to spearhead the revival of her heritage? After all, one Wampanoag, late on in the film, refers to Jessie's undertakings as forming something like a "secret club". Jessie's final sentiments seem more progressive than that however. Her aim instead is to open up possibilities for their children, and to draw strength from living in two worlds: a wonderfully upbeat pedagogical strategy, which – far from bringing to mind colonial stereotypes of "uncivilized peoples" – offers a greater progressive potential than dominant approaches to "multiculturalism". Western leaders might take note.

Makepeace's intention is to share with the viewer Jessie's passion and drive in the restoration of the Wampanoag language. This is clear throughout. What she also achieves – which very few have ever done – is the focus on native culture to the avoidance of exoticization. This means that alongside the lush, green nature and woodwind sounds conventional of Native American representation, Jessie is also shown in her home, in the classroom, and in the library, as well as with other Wampanoags playing card-games in their mother-tongue: it is as if they have been forced to adapt and are now, at last, manipulating the modern world to suit their own ways.

One of the strongest points in *We Still Live Here* is the animation used throughout: alluding at once to the handwritten scripture which aided Jessie's research, as well as more archaic forms of

storytelling. If this last point might be pursued and the spectator does take on Jessie's advice ("On our watch, we shouldn't shut down possibilities for our children"), Makepeace's film makes as much a profound point – in the age of digital filmmaking – about the medium she uses, as she does about native cultures. It is an important meditation on the power and necessity of history, the document, and education.