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Bontoc Eulogy. Marlon Fuentes, director.

A World on Display. New Deal Films, Inc..

Reviewed by Jim Zwick

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Video Review: Remembering St. Louis, 1904

Two documentaries recently released on video by the Cinema Guild present contrasting views of the 1904 St. Louis world's fair. Focusing on the experiences of white American fair-goers who marveled at the architecture, technology, and peoples exhibited at the fair, <cite>A World on Display</cite> takes a nostalgic look back at a time when motion pictures, airplanes, automobiles, and ice cream cones were new inventions and "when going to a world's fair in St. Louis was like a voyage to a far-off universe." In a story of displacement and remembrance spanning four generations of Filipinos, <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> uses the experiences of the largest group displayed at the fair to examine its continuing relevance as a defining moment in Philippine-American relations and Filipino American history. Both documentaries use contemporary photographs and motion pictures extensively, but they examine the fair from entirely different perspectives, and there is very little overlap between them. Both will be useful in the classroom. <p> <cite>A World on Display</cite> begins with excerpts from interviews with several people who visited the fair almost ninety years before when they were young children. Here and elsewhere throughout the video, fair-goers testify to the profound effect it had upon their lives. One person describes it as "one of the turning points in my life." Another says that it introduced "things we never thought of before. We became acquainted with the world of people.... It was truly an education that I don't think we could have gotten any other way." The narrator makes the point that fair-goers "saw how hard it was to tell the difference between what was real and what was an illusion. They learned what it meant to be an American at the beginning of the Twentieth Century." Possibly because they were very young when they visited the fair, none of the fair-goers interviewed differentiated between reality and illusion in the interview excerpts included in the video. The impressions they formed as children seem to have stayed with them throughout their lives. One remembered the Igorots brought to the United States as part of the Philippine exhibition because his uncle had been a missionary in the Philippines and knew their language. "My father said it was just a lot of clicking noises. It wasn't really words expressed, but that was their language, and he [the uncle] knew it!" It is easy to imagine this story being told in the same words, with the same paternal authority cited, ninety years before when this person returned home from the fair. Such impressions were disseminated far beyond the fair grounds. "I was constantly talking with people ... about the fair," another relates, adding, "It was a great institution for the spread of knowledge." <p> A more critical perspective on the fair is provided by historians Neil Harris, Zeynep Celik, and Robert W. Rydell, and anthropologist Ted S. Jojola. The architecture and the dual structure of the fair–modern structures showcasing new technologies surrounded by representations of "primitive peoples"–are discussed from several perspectives. Harris notes that the fair represented a "purified, refined version of what [people of the time] hoped their cities would be-

come." Film footage of formally dressed women strolling through the fair with their parasols underscores Harris's point that the grounds were purposefully laid out, well-ordered and well-maintained. It was a place where people always had something to do and felt safe. Celik highlights the duality carried over to the St. Louis fair from the previous international exhibitions in Paris. The Street of Cairo exhibition was created for the 1889 exposition in Paris by a French designer who claimed that it was more authentic than Cairo itself because it included none of the modern influences already present in the real city. Described by the narrator as "a lasting reminder of a Cairo that never existed," this exhibit was later included in the St. Louis fair. Rydell argues that the "overriding purpose of the fair really centered on an effort to promote America's new role as an overseas imperial power."[1] While the juxtaposition of "modern" and "primitive" buttressed assumptions of racial superiority, representations of Native American and Filipino life created an impression of continuity between westward expansion across the continent and the new overseas empire. Jojola notes that the educational priorities of the fair's organizers were frequently overridden as ethnographic displays were choreographed to appeal to visitors. Within the dual structure of the fair, the large Japanese exhibit, staged during the Russo-Japanese War, was an anomaly that did not fit the stereotypes advanced by the fair. Harris notes that it presented a modern country that had fundamentally different traditions and concepts than the Western (and Christian) countries fair-goers identified with modernity.[2] <p> The video presents a wide range of the fair's attractions in short segments devoted to the carnival-like entertainment available on the Pike, the wonderment of fair-goers at the new technologies introduced, and domestic displays such as an exhibit recreating the Galveston Flood and Westinghouse's films showing its Pittsburgh foundry and assembly rooms. Commenting on the displays of new technologies, Rydell points out that the fair transformed "customers" into "consumers" by creating "wish lists" of new products. <p> There is an incongruity throughout much of the video between what seems to have been a desire on the filmmaker's part to romanticize the fair and the information supplied by the scholars interviewed who often present it in a much less appealing light. This is especially evident at the beginning and close of the video. At the beginning, the historical context of the fair is presented by asking, "Can we imagine what it was like to be a child of seven, ten, or thirteen at the turn of the century" when many of the technologies we now take for granted were brand new? This "age of innocence" approach is perhaps appropriate to set up the interviews with fair-goers who were in that age range in 1904, but it does not anticipate a large portion of the film's commentary. Despite the lasting impressions expressed by the fair-goers interviewed and the enduring cultural and political impacts of the fair highlighted by the historians, the video ends on a nostalgic note that seems to deny any importance beyond the fair's short run: "The fair was not intended to last.... A world had been put on display in St. Louis, and it was gone forever." <p> <cite>A World on Display</cite> demonstrates the role played by the St. Louis world's fair in defining "what it meant to be an American at the beginning of the Twentieth Century" and, though probably not by design, the survival of some of those beliefs nearly a century after the fair. <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> demonstrates its role in shaping Filipino and, especially, Filipino American identity. While <cite>A World on Display</cite> shows signs of an unstated conflict between the filmmaker's perspective and some of the information presented in the documentary, in <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> the story of the Filipinos displayed at the fair is told within a fictional framework that allows the filmmaker's perspective of its relevance to be more fully developed. <p> At the end of <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite>, there is a standard disclaimer seen more commonly in made-for-television dramas than historical documentaries: "This story is inspired by actual events. Any similarities to persons living or dead is purely coincidental." The film's interweaving of fiction and nonfiction is unusual in historical documentaries, but not unlike such books commonly used in the classroom as Maxine Hong Kingston's <cite>The Woman Warrior</cite> and <cite>Chinamen</cite>. Like those books, <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> deals with relationships between historical and familial events, myth, memories, interpretations and identity. It addresses these not as artifacts of a world "gone forever" but as personal history that must now be uncovered to answer a series of questions raised at the beginning of the film that are important for understanding the Filipino American experience: "Why did we leave our home? Why did we come to America? Why have we chosen to stay? What are the stories that define us as a people?" <p> <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> tells one of those stories from the perspective of a first generation Filipino American who tries to trace what happened to his grandfather, a Bontoc Igorot warrior, who was brought from the Philippines to be displayed at the St. Louis fair and who never returned to his native village. This narrative structure allows the film to deal with four generations of displacement. The grandfather is brought from his tribal

homeland to the exposition in St. Louis. The narrator grew up in Manila with his parents. There he is questioned by schoolmates about his Igorot roots–did he ever wear a g-string? did he eat dog?–but having grown up in the city, "as far removed from tribal life as one could imagine," he never met an Igorot. As a young man, he leaves Manila for the United States. "In the beginning I lived in two worlds: the sights and sounds of my new life and then the flickering after-images of the place I once called home," but these are forgotten as the events of day-to-day life take precedence. His two children, born in the United States, have never been to the Philippines and might not recognize their great-grandfather if they were ever able to learn what happened to him. This family history, told in the first few minutes of the video, serves to situate the Filipino experience at the St. Louis fair within a context that highlights its importance as a pivotal event in Filipino American history. Family history is also used to briefly contextualize the fair within the broader historical events of the turn of the century. Another grandfather is said to have fought and died in the Philippine Revolution against Spain and, after the beginning of the Philippine-American War in February of 1899, its continuation fought against the United States. <p> The account of the fair itself covers some of the same ground as <cite>A World on Display</cite>, but from a different perspective, and it begins in the Philippines with the grandfather's decision to make the trip to St. Louis with other members of his tribe. Historical photographs and film footage of the Philippines as well as of the fair are used, and these are supplemented with dramatizations of the grandfather's and narrator's experiences and of the research conducted to produce the video. Side trips through the entertainment pavilions at the fair are presented as these might have been viewed by an Igorot who finds little that would be useful in the mountains at home. The anthropological studies made of the Igorots and other Filipinos at the fair are used as clues to the grandfather's experiences and fate. The choreography of native customs by fair officials, noted in <cite>A World on Display</cite> as undermining the authenticity of the displays, here leads the grandfather to lose all sense of time as rituals normally performed to mark events are monotonously repeated day after day. There are also poignant accounts of Filipinos who froze in a box car while being transported to the fair, and of others who died during the fair and whose bodies were immediately taken away. Mourning rituals had to be performed without access to the bodies as oblivious white fair-goers watched as if it were any other performance at the fair. The more than seven hundred Filipino Scouts and constabulary included among the 1,102 Filipinos displayed at the fair are presented here as a force for controlling the Filipinos when conflicts arose between tribal groups or between the fair's organizers and the people on display. Unable to determine what happened to his grandfather after the fair, the narrator takes us to museums, where the skeletons of Filipinos who died at the fair might still be displayed, and to the Smithsonian Institute where he finds the carefully preserved brains of three Igorots. There he muses, "I am still not sure of my grandfather's whereabouts. Perhaps his brain lies hidden in a museum somewhere, tucked away on some musty shelf, waiting all these years to be discovered." <p> <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> does not attempt to draw conclusions from the story of the Filipino experience at St. Louis. At its beginning, the narrator states that "to survive in this new land we had to forget.... Now we must remember in order to survive." It performs this act of remembering very well and, in doing so, provides a unique perspective of the 1904 world's fair. <p> Both <cite>A World on Display</cite> and <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> will be useful in the classroom. <cite>A World on Display</cite> is strongest in its discussion of the architecture and dual structure of the fair, and the interviews with fair-goers clearly demonstrate the sense of awe and amazement the fair generated. Although it discusses the representations of "primitive" peoples displayed at the fair, another recent video, <cite>Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire</cite> by the American Social History Project, does a much better job of presenting how the world's fairs helped to shape American definitions of "the other" and of framing that with detailed background on the domestic and international contexts in which the fairs were created.[3] Besides its obvious appeal for classes dealing with the Asian American experience, <cite>Bontoc Eulogy</cite> will undoubtedly make an interesting complement to either <cite>A World on Display</cite> or <cite>Savage Acts</cite>, neither of which address what it was like to be displayed at the fair or the consequences of that experience for those who were defined as "the other." Its mixture of fact and fiction may also make it an appropriate choice for classes on documentary film, biography, and narrative. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. See also Robert W. Rydell, <cite>All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916</cite> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). <p> [2]. See also Neil Harris, "All the World a Melting Pot? Japan at American Fairs, 1876-1904," in Akira Iriye, ed., <cite>Mutual Images: Essays in American Japanese Relations</cite> (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 24-

54. <p> [3]. Pennee Bender, Joshua Brown and Andrea Ades Vasquez, directors, <cite>Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire</cite> (New York: American Social History Project, 1995), 30 min. VHS video. See my "Video Review: Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire," h-<A HREF="mailto:amstdy@msu.edu">amstdy@msu.edu, Nov. 7, 1995; also available on the World Wide Web at `http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/unofficial/fjzwick/centennial/texts/savacts` html. <p>

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