

of contemporary society, it would behoove Micronesians and their leaders to “appreciate a bit more deeply an important aspect of their traditional culture, one that permeated everything else” (221).

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Documentary Film Review

GIRL MODEL [FILM]. *Directed, produced and edited by David Redmond and Ashley Sabin; consulting producers, Marcy Garriott, Robert Garriot. Brooklyn, NY: Carnivalesquefilms, 2011. 1 videodisc (77 min.) US\$250.00. <http://carnivalesquefilms.com>.*

In *Girl Model*, filmmakers David Redmond and Ashley Sabin tell the story of a 13-year-old aspiring model Nadja Vall, who travelled from her Siberian hometown to Japan hoping to launch her modeling career. They portray the unregulated modeling industry as morally corrupt and exploitative of young girls. In Japan’s modeling industry, the demand for young, tall, blond girls has brought numerous Eastern Europeans to Tokyo. Oftentimes, these girls return to their hometowns with little modeling experience and find themselves in debt to modeling agencies. Some of them are also known to have entered the underground world of child prostitution.

The film begins with a Japanese-sponsored modeling contest in rural Siberia where Nadja was selected to work in Japan. Nadja then travelled unaccompanied to Tokyo but no one showed up at the Narita Airport to pick her up. Despite much frustration and fear (as might be expected from a teenage girl traveling outside of her country for the first time), she managed to navigate her way into a small flat in Tokyo, which she shared with another aspiring model from Russia. For her to legally enter Japan with a work visa, Japan’s immigration control laws stipulated that the modeling agency must provide her with two jobs and US\$8,000. Nadja’s contract restricted her not only from travelling, swimming and being out in the sun, but also from growing. That is, the size of her waist, hips, and bust must remain the same—an unrealistic expectation for a 13-year-old girl. Moreover, the contract, which the employer could change from one day to another, was written in Japanese and English, both languages that she did not understand. Unaware that her living expenses would be deducted from her paycheck, Nadja returned home with a debt of US\$2,000, after her modeling career did not materialize in Japan. This debt may have resulted in Nadja being sent later on to Taiwan and South Korea.

Interestingly, it was Ashley (a former model) who approached the

filmmakers with the idea for this documentary. She clearly provided Redmond and Sabin with amazing access to people behind the modeling industry. Redmond and Sabin do not portray Ashley and her friends, who see themselves as saviors of young girls, in a positive light. Instead, the filmmakers depict them as people who shamelessly lie to naive girls and their families about the money and glamour that await in Japan's fashion capital. Once Ashley identified the girls and made their travel arrangements, she returned to her lonely Connecticut home. This portrayal has come under criticism—interestingly, not from Ashley but from Nadja and her family. After all, Nadja, who is now 17 years old, is being represented by a St. Petersburg's modeling agency: not a story of failure.

Personally, I enjoyed the contrasting views of “beauty,” as cleverly explored through the eyes of Ashley, the Japanese people and Nadja. For Ashley, she sees beauty strictly in terms of proportions/appearance (i.e., tall, skinny, barely pubescent, blond), as demanded by Japanese modeling agencies. The Japanese, in turn, view youth as “something innocent” (a temporary state) and therefore beautiful. For Nadja, “external beauty reflects inner virtue and intelligence” (a permanent state). This philosophical/cultural difference on aesthetics is marvelously described by the subjects themselves.

More substantively, this documentary requires better contextualization and tighter editing of the narratives. The film appears to be a patchwork of interpretations or self-reflections from key players in the modeling business and lacks in-depth research into the subject matter. Perhaps this is a consequence of the idea for the film not originating with the filmmakers. As a result, the audience is left to put the pieces together themselves. Those without much knowledge of Japan, Siberia and the modeling industry will only see the exploitative nature of the modeling industry that preys on young girls from Eastern Europe. They will miss out on Japan's larger problem of child pornography (that feeds the multi-billion dollar *manga* industry) and child prostitution, Russia's recent demographic changes and economic challenges, and cultural differences of exoticism within the modeling industry across the world.

The film could also use further editing. In giving voice to each actor involved in the Japanese modeling business, the filmmakers have included long, unnecessary scenes that add little to their story (e.g., Ashley's collection of photographs of body sections). The long scenes/narratives, which often slow down the tempo of the film, could have been an effective way to get the audience to reflect or contemplate on the scene. Without much contextualization, however, the audience has little to reflect on.