REVIEW

Review of Sin Dudas (Jamon, 2016)

Robert Rownd

In 72 minutes, *Sin Dudas* [*No Doubts*], (Rotthoff & Jamon, 2016) moves counter clock-wise around the island of Negros to document the current state of extrajudicial killings (EJKs) in the rural areas of the Philippines. Starting with a re-enactment of the murder of Benjie Bayles in 2010 and ending with that killing's subsequent legal proceedings through 2015, it is a quiet advocacy piece that paints a bleak picture of the current state of play before appealing to the audience's higher morals and sense of fair play. While it is well crafted by Producer Ulirich Rotthoff, writer Choy Pangilinan, and director/editor Roehl Jamon, the film is both too short and too local in its focus for its own good.

No one who appears in the film disputes any of the facts of the situation as they are presented. On camera, government officials, officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and local residents all agree that certain elements of the AFP stationed in Negros have been tasked by unnamed players to obstruct legal grassroots organizing efforts on the part of farmers and other rural workers. They also agree that this harassment follows a pattern. First, the organizers are rightly or wrongly labeled as members of known insurgent groups in the area. Next, shows of force are followed by threats in the form of anonymous text messages or late night phone calls, in an attempt to intimidate the organizers. Finally, in some cases, theatrical executions—many of which use an almost absurd amount of firepower to take down a 'suspect'—are carried out.

The opening ten minutes of the film recount one such execution. Benjie Bayles seems to have been, by all accounts, a pleasant and fairly simple man. It has been suggested that he was an active member of the New People's Army (NPA). This is denied on camera by several of his relatives and a few other people who knew him well. No comment from the NPA is included in the film.

One summer day in 2010, two men parked a motorcycle across the street from a rural bus stop pretending to fix a flat. After a few minutes, they calmly walked over to where Benjie and a friend were waiting for a ride, drew .45 caliber pistols and told Benjie's friend to get running. Benjie's friend fled the scene and they calmly proceeded to fire at least 18 rounds at Benjie. Everyone (civilians, military officials, local government officials, friends, and family) agrees that this is what happened.

The film is about impunity, defined in an on screen graphic towards the beginning of the film as the "exemption from punishment or freedom from the injurious consequences of an action" (Rotthoff & Jamon, 2016). It lays out the background that allows these killings to occur dispassionately and objectively. Nobody would be offended by the way their positions are presented in the film. It is a fair and balanced account of the positions taken, but ultimately that works against it, because it creates a false equivalence among all of the sides of the conflict that doesn't allow for a deeper and more nuanced consideration of who benefits from the continued perpetration of such EJKs. As horrible as the Benjie Bayles killing is in and of itself, it's the calm and deliberate methods that were employed by the perpetrators, along with the fact that it was the 17th such killing in the area, which makes it stand out. The .45 caliber M1911 style pistols identified as the murder weapons feature seven bullet clips that pump a fresh round into the chamber every time the weapon is fired. They can be fired continuously until emptied out, but require that the weapon be cocked once when reloading a fresh clip. These aren't Dirty Harry's great big revolver from the Clint Eastwood films, but do the ammunition math: If there are 18 shells recovered from the site after the killing and a maximum of 14 bullets in the fully loaded guns, then one or both of these men had to reload their weapon and start firing again at a single unarmed man. When the two weapons were recovered shortly afterwards, one was empty and the other had a single remaining bullet.

We know all of this because of the excellent police work that was done after the killing. The killers were quickly caught, the weapons were recovered, and all are still in custody five years later. This doesn't get to be an account of justice rendered, however, because the glacial pace of the judicial system in this country means that they are still awaiting trial. But that isn't much different from a lot of violent crimes in the Philippines.

Prosecution takes an incredibly long time. Currently, the suspects have been denied bail and are sitting in judicial limbo, and Benjie's family and friends are denied the sense of closure and justice that would come with a conviction. However, this is, in some sense, progress—Benjie's case marks the first time suspects in an EJK have been processed this far. This is ruefully acknowledged by all involved in the conflict, who seem to share a common sense of frustration with the incompleteness of the process. But lost in all of this calm consideration is the understanding of how effective this current stalemate works as a deterrent to political action, policing and controlling grassroots organization in Negros and, by extension, the rest of the country side.

It is a wonderfully theatrical image to see a fictional character on a movie screen reload and continue firing in the middle of a scene because it can tell us so much about that fictional character's state of mind, and is just plain exciting to watch. However, shooting a clip dry and taking the time to reload to continue unnecessary shooting in a real life situation is actually quite silly and risky for the shooters. Not to mention expensive. With their guns empty while reloading, these soldiers were temporarily vulnerable to any possible counter attack, and they increased the chances of one happening by allowing someone to run away before the violence started.

These mechanical details are important because they strongly suggest two things not considered in the film. First, the perpetrators had no fear of ever getting caught after the fact. Moreover, they (or whoever planned the hit) also had no fear of meeting any form of resistance or interference while committing the act. This could be argued to be another type of impunity, but to leave it at that level ignores or at best downplays the second idea: that the act was carried out not only to silence and remove Benjie, but to create terror through excessive violence. This killing was done in such a way to create the maximum amount of confusion and intimidation in others who were organizing legal resistance among some of the poorest workers in the area. It was both political theater and an advertisement for the power of the state. This raises the question of whether impunity is actually the story here. Or is it the arrogant, unfeeling, short-sighted thinking involved in exploiting people this way, enabled by impunity?

This point is driven home in the other extended description of an organized act of violence, the Cologia household fire and murders. An interview of the orphaned teenager—the murdered Cologia couple's daughter—was intercut with a walk-through of the ground still scarred from the fire. Again, we see ample evidence of a theatrical killing. This time, 63 bullets were recovered from and around the two dead bodies, and the family's home seems to have actually been torched to draw attention to the killings rather than conceal

them (Rotthoff & Jamon, 2016). Again, the ammunition math suggests a level of overkill that not only required additional time, risk, and expense, but seems to be intended to leave a statement to the community as much as to silence specific opposition members.

As in the Bayles execution, the theatrical violence employed against the Cologias undercuts the AFP's contention that these "human rights violations" are only or primarily a result of AFP foot soldiers' unfamiliarity with domestic policing procedures. Neither of these excessive displays of force would be common in the heat of a battle between roughly equal combatants because they incur unneeded risk. Benjie Bayles's murder is something closer to a modern day mob hit, and the Cologias house is more an example of scorched earth campaign, a way of subduing a rural populace that has been growing restless.

Missing from the narrative of the film is the voice of the NPA, whose presence in the area, real or imagined, is alleged to be the source of unknown players' anxiety. As it stands, there is not enough screen time in the film to dig into this issue, but it would be interesting to see these filmmakers funded well enough to expand the second act with further interviews and some discussion of the insurgency in Negros. Perhaps a feature length piece would be more successful in connecting the dots. The work as it exists now suffers from a lack of balance: trying to be objective while being incomplete. Shouldn't the nine hundred pound guerilla be asked if Benjie or the Cologias were active in the NPA at the time of their deaths? And, if there is an active insurgency in the area, why aren't the people antagonizing the organizers more cautiously? Something is amiss in Negros and a longer, more expansive film should address that.

As nice as it would be to label impunity as a common problem that could be solved by collective action at a local level, this doesn't seem to be the case. Closing out the film, Benjamin Ramos Jr. of the National Union of People's Lawyers emphasizes that while we've just watch a story focalized through individual cases, the struggle is not actually personal and is best understood when abstracted into a consideration of power relationships. Every individual act of harassment, even those that end in violence, is an act committed against all of us. As such, as Joel Obar observes, it is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens from criminals, revolutionary forces, and the state itself.

References

Rotthoff, U. (Producer), and Jamon, R. (Director). (2016) Sin Dudas. Motion Picture (Philippines): Cine Alagua.

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