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ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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Two feature length documentaries screened at the Berlin Film Festival investigate the mechanism of Politics. One was ‘State Legislature’ by veteran American Filmmaker, Frederick Wiseman. For the duration of three and a half hours, the film follows the parliament of Idaho, a state located in North Western region of United States. The other film ‘Campaign’ by a Japanese filmmaker Kazuhiro Soda chronicles the struggle of a young candidate of Liberal Democratic party fighting for a seat in the city of Kawasaki, a bedroom suburb of Tokyo.

For over 40 years, Wiseman has been a keen and critical observer of various aspects of American society. For this project, he filmed the legislative process of Idaho, a republican state in which democrats holds only a quarter of the seats. But his film is anything but a criticism towards the rise of the neo-conservatism in America. The filmmaker wanted to shoot in the Far West, in a place where elected officials served their term only “part-time”. In fact in Idaho, when the three-months annual mandatory term is over, senators and congressmen return to their ranch, their cabinet or go back to running their respective businesses.

In those 12 weeks, Wiseman ran up and down the stairs of the Capitol of Idaho—built just like the one in Washington, reduced in scale – in order to cover the debates. The film was then edited into sequences of varying lengths, each covering a certain topic. They are poignant topics that divide the United States today. They range from deregulation of public services, homosexual marriages, school violence, separation of the Church and the State to the smoking ban in public locations. “I never thought I’d be able to bring together all these themes within a single film”, explains the director. “The fact that the session is so short forced the policy makers to discuss everything, to bring up all the issues within a limited time frame.”

What is striking is the quality and the politeness with which the debates are carried out. Though it’s a little off-putting as Wiseman himself admits (“It’s a film that depends on the dialogue, we cannot show anything through body movements”), this ode to the democratic representative and to the legislature should no doubt find a French distributor. The investor, Channel Arte disapproves of the unusually long format that Wiseman chose for this film. The conflict is yet to be resolved.

12 days of Campaign

Kazuhiro Soda admires Wiseman greatly. His film opens with an image of a man with a megaphone in his hand, accompanied by several people who are handing out flyers. They stand near the entrance to a large station and greet the commuters who are hurrying to their way home. No one pays any attention but he continues to repeat his name. This chant is punctuated by the name of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. We find ourselves on the first day of a 12-day campaign of Kazuhiko Yamauchi, 40, who had been singled by the LDP (conservative party) to be suddenly to be given some power in politics.

The film is just the tip of the iceberg. “I shot 48 hours of footage, and I tried to find the right balance between Yamauchi’s public appearances and the behind-the-scene discussions” explains Kazuhiro Soda, who currently resides in New York. He flew to Japan once he found out that a former college classmate who was known as a liberal was running for office for the Liberal Democratic Party.

Shot in HD, ‘Campaign’ has many comical moments. It is a film that thrives on the strength of a fascinating protagonist who seems to be constantly at flux, floating and sinking in the feudal system of LDP. He is subjected to every possible form of humiliation. “In that way, the political culture of Japan is similar to that of a corporate culture. The young ones all have to go through the hazing rituals.”

by Thomas Sotinel