

## 檜山 NARAYAMA

'Narayama' literally means "The Mountain with the Oaks."<sup>1</sup> There lives a God on Narayama. Everyone who has been, every single one, has seen the God. That is why no one doubts it.<sup>2</sup> Narayama is a mythical mountain in the North of Japan where old people are brought to die. Now that my mother and I regularly go out for walks together, I have noticed there are also many oaks in our village. My mother is in a wheelchair and I push her along. We take our walks under the oak trees, towards the graves of her loved ones, to her friend in Huize Walden, to the all but vanished ruins of my grandmother's house, ...

This summer I modelled portraits of my mother at all stages of her life, from the age of 7 to 90 years old. I installed a studio in the garden shed of her flower and vegetable garden, so I could be close to her. I'd bring clay and tools there and worked there from morning 'till evening.

My mother keeps old photographs in a tin. Every photograph tells a story. They depict her as a schoolgirl, when she is taking her holy communion, as a milkmaid, as a pilgrim to Lourdes, as a bride, as a grandmother, as a widow... She has written the dates on the back of the photographs; her whole existence allows itself to be read, her life surrounded by her family members, whom she has always take care of.

The installation NARAYAMA includes 21 sculptures, a film and blue tarpaulins. The sculptures of white clay all received a year as a title, from 1938 to 2020. They are placed on a blue tarpaulin; in the chronological order of the human life which they portray. The white ceramics on a tarpaulin-blue background bear a clear resemblance to the Renaissance Madonna's by the Della Robbia brothers. The blue tarpaulins hold the sculptures of a human life and I ascribe to them the imagined road to Narayama.

The film was recorded during the walks I took with my mother, with the camera mounted on the wheelchair. The texts were recorded by KOGA Rieko and FUJJI Sayuri, both of them artists who work in Tokyo and in Paris. They read the 'lines of the pilgrimage' from FUKAZAWA's 'The Ballad of Narayama' from the original Japanese story. The film has subtitles that are successively in French, Dutch and English.

'The Ballad of Narayama' is poignantly resonant with our times. The Corona-crisis makes it painfully obvious that we have a problematic way of dealing with the eldest generation in our society. During the first lockdown I read FUKAZAWA's fairy-tale and watched the films of IMAMURA and KINOSHITA one more time. I told the story and showed both films to my 17-year-old students in the eleventh year at the Hibernia school. I have their permission to quote some of their impressions here: Juultje De Bie: "the extreme treatment of the elderly in the worldview of the film (The Ballad of Narayama by KINOSHITA) is in many ways unfathomable, but it still uneasily coincides with how the elderly are treated in many cultures when they are no longer considered 'useful.'"

Andreas Francken: "The moment O Rin has to go to the mountain is not a very pleasant one. It is a gesture of sacrifice, which is very beautiful, but also a real shame. If this were to happen in our time, now, I don't know what I would do when one's grandma 'leaves / dies' in order to make room for new life. Those thoughts would haunt me for the rest of my life. Because, what if she was still healthy and could have lived for much longer? What if she still had a whole future ahead of her? What if the new life were to die, for example because of a miscarriage, or an accident? Did she then die for nothing? Or is it all just meant to be? I wonder whether this is the right way. There is most likely a different way, a better and less awful way. One whereby everyone leaves at their appointed time."

Alvar Peeters: "The inhabitants of the village assume they will no longer be able to live by the time they reach 70, and so O Rin is surprised and ashamed, for example, that she still has all her teeth. It reveals an inner conflict: why is my body still working at a time when I should be dying? She doesn't doubt the fact that she has to die, which gives a strong communal feeling. The negative side of it is

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<sup>1</sup> *Étude à propos des chansons de Narayama, Shichirô Fukazawa, pub. Gallimard 1959, translated from the Japanese into French by Bernard Frank, p. 20.*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid. p. 28.*

also shown. Tatsuhei's father refuses to take his mother to the mountain, and Tatsuhei, who followed the traditions of the village blindly, killed his father for this. Therefore, the question that is also asked is: Can morality become dogmatic, how does that manifest itself, and when should one resist it?"

FUKAZAWA Shichirô wrote 'Narayama Bushikô' or 'The Ballad of Narayama' in 1956. We became acquainted with the story in Europe thanks to the film adaptations that were made in Japan by KINOSHITA Keisuke (1958) and by IMAMURA Shohei (1983). And also thanks to the Korean KIM Ki-Young, who in his film 'Goryeojang' (1963) made a film of the trip to the mountaintop by the main character with the same name, with his mother on his back.

Fukazawa's 'Ballad of Narayama' takes place in the 'village on the Other Side.' There are 22 houses in the village and a big old tree, the Kaya no ki. Every house has a name: 'The Tree Trunk,' 'The House of the Cent,' 'The Carbonized Fir tree,' 'The House where it Rains,' 'The House by the Lake,' ... In every house lives a large family, with at least 3 generations under one roof. Life in the village is raw and primitive.

There are too many people and there is not enough food to go around. When the inhabitants of 'The House where it Rains' are caught stealing potatoes and peas, all twelve members of the family are buried alive. As the crows squawk loudly, the villagers incite each other to fell a bloodthirsty, but in their eyes a just and inevitable judgement. In the darkness of night, they throw the whole family into a deep pit and fill it in. When the sun rises in the morning no one breathes a word about what happened. They are buried alive and never to be spoken of again. There is an unwritten law that a human life can last seventy years. Once one has reached that age, people have to make way and leave the food to the younger generations. The eldest child shall carry their parent to the Narayama mountain and leave them there to die. It is a long journey on foot, dangerous ravines have to be passed, along narrow upward climbing paths. Once they reach the top, they have to find their own way through the oak forest.

Two elderly people have reached the age of 70, O Rin and her neighbour Mata-yan. During the final year of her life O Rin prepares herself thoroughly for her pilgrimage to the Narayama Mountain. She is the unmissable matriarch of the house called 'The Tree Trunk.' With her departure in sight, she organizes, in utmost detail, her own superfluousness. She never complains and seems to be in a state of Buddhistic enlightenment.

The day before the departure she calls together the experienced villagers, those who have already made the journey. In a ceremony the rules and the road to be followed to Narayama are passed on. The following night O Rin and her eldest son Tatsuhei leave for the mountain.

Mata-yan, the neighbour, resists his obligatory, impending death with every fibre of his being. But his family wants rid of him: hunger has made them cruel and anxious. For their old father, the pilgrimage to Narayama becomes a horrific march of death.

For the obstinate cases, like Mata-yan, a shortened version of the passage to Narayama is permitted. It is an open secret that the eldest pilgrim, at the end of the ceremony and outside the closed doors of the house, whispers on: 'If you don't want to go all the way to the top, it is also okay to return alone at the Seven Valleys'<sup>3</sup>

In other words, it is permitted to throw the grandfather into the ravine halfway up. That is the simple and quick way to get it over with.

But O Rin and Tatsuhei take the long road, all the way to the end. When O Rin kneels down, and waits for death to come and fetch her, it begins to snow! The snow is the sign of good luck, the welcome to the traveller, sent by the God of Narayama.

Marie Julia Bollansée, October 2020  
Translation Kate Mayne

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p. 116.