



Adam Hartzell interviews director Jessica Oreck

Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo An Ethno-biological



MY WIFE LOVES

video games, but for most of the year, this passion lays dormant. That is, until the new edition of a Japanese game called *Boku no Natsuyasumi* (*My Summer Vacation*) is released. Then my wife blossoms into an avid gamer, PSP always in hand.

Boku no Natsuyasumi is a game that would stun the average American — not for its violence or gore, but for the complete absence of violence and gore. It is inconceivable that such a game would even exist in the U.S. market. *Boku no Natsuyasumi* follows the exploits of a child doing what Japanese children do in nature, swimming in the watering hole in search of ‘treasure,’ snagging butterflies in a net for one’s collection, and capturing beetles for later battles with fellow young summer vacationers. Seeing my wife so engaged in a gaming narrative so beyond the U.S. gaming world, I was intrigued and fascinated about the untapped potential in video games. It didn’t all have to be beating people up when not killing them, or recklessly racing fast cars, or striving towards virtual union with sport celebrities. I am now aware of the non-nihilistic nature of social games such as *Farmville* or *Foursquare*, but *Boku no Natsuyasumi* was the first video game that helped me realize

there was such potential.

This is the perspective with which I came to Jessica Oreck’s documentary *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo*, an ethno-biological meditation on how a large segment of Japan’s population appreciates insects rather than fears them. Oreck is an animal keeper and docent at the American Museum of Natural History who paired her college studies of biology, ecology, and botany with filmmaking. What Oreck hopes to do with her films is to study whole cultures and how they interact with the world in order to “get people not to change the way they think about nature,” but instead to get people “to look at the way they think about nature.” I sat down with Oreck for a brief interview at the offices of Larsen Associates to talk about her film and her experience with Japan and insects.

ADAM HARTZELL: First, I’m curious — how did you find out about how many Japanese perceive insects differently, that they aren’t something to fear but to appreciate?

JESSICA ORECK: I was teacher-assisting at a class in the American Museum of Natural History. We had a guest speaker come in, a Japanese woman, who talked about how in Japan everyone loved insects from when they were very little up until they were very old. And I’ve always loved

insects since I was really little. It wasn’t a popular thing. It wasn’t something that any of my friends enjoyed. So as soon as I found out about that I ran home and started looking it up.

This was early 2007 and there was nothing about [Japan’s penchant for insects] in English at the time. So I set that idea aside in my mind and was very disappointed. And then literally two days later, my sister is sitting at an airport in Baltimore and strikes up this conversation with a Japanese-American entomologist sitting next to her who happens to be totally bicultural, growing up one semester in Tokyo, one semester in New York for his entire life. So he was intimate with both cultures and he was an entomologist.

And this is [the eventual co-producer of the film] Akito...

...Akito Kawahara. And so he goes around the [United States] giving lectures about how Japanese people love insects and how different it is from America. And [my sister said to him], “You’ve got to get in touch with my sister. You guys are going to hit it off.”

So she put us in touch and on the first phone call, I said, “Akito, I want to make this movie.” And he was like, “Cool. We’ll stay at my parent’s house. I’ll introduce you to my bug friends. It’s totally cool.” It didn’t



Meditation

end up being quite that easy in the end, but it was like the stars had aligned for me to make the project. It was pretty awesome.

So you had a guide through the process in Akito?

Well, he’s not a film person. He’s an entomologist. He had just got his PhD. He had ideas about who we should meet. And then the rest of it was up to me. I was like, “Ok, We’re just going to go and I have no idea what Japan’s like. We’re just going to show up there and hope it works out.” I spent a lot of time figuring out what sort of imagery I wanted and then we’d go and meet these people and follow them around. It was a very stressful and exciting experience.

One of things that I found poignant is when we come across the video games. Did Akito take you to that and say “Oh, you’re gonna want to see this”? Or did you stumble upon those games yourself? How did they come into your film?

Akito originally told us about a particular video game...I can not think of what it’s called right now...

MushiKing?

Not the MushiKing one, it’s something different. It’s also in the movie. It’s about this scientist who has a lab of insects and they all escape and you have to help him find the insects. So it’s an insect-hunting

video game. And you just go around with a net and you have all these different tools. You have different types of net, different lengths of net. You have tweezers, all these different things to pick things up with. And you go insect-hunting. So he told us about that one and we actually bought that game specifically [for the film]. We gave it to the young kid in the film. “You should play this game!” And he loved it. He loved the game.

But the other one, MushiKing, is quite famous. It was the number one video game in Japan for several years. They have MushiKing-themed everything, MushiKing chopsticks, MushiKing pool floats, you name it, they have it. Underwear! MushiKing underwear. So it’s very popular there.

When you were in Japan, did you get a sense that it was across the population that there was this acceptance of insects, or did you also come across certain scenarios where there was disgust as well, an un-appreciation you would find similar to the States and elsewhere?

They’re going to step on a cockroach in a kitchen just as quickly as we are. But their ability to distinguish between a good bug and a bad bug is so far beyond our . . . even our possibility. Here in the United States, people hear a cricket and they’re like “Oh,

what is that? A grasshopper? Oh, that’s a frog!” People just have no concept. But in Japan, everyone knows not just what a cricket sounds like but what each species of cricket sounds like. And they have different species of crickets that they know come out at a certain time of the year. People will travel across the country just to hear a really strong chorus of a particular cricket. They don’t love insects across the board, but they also don’t generalize and say “Eww, bugs, gross!” Which I think is a lot better.

It was great to see that scene in your movie, where Japanese people travel just to go see fireflies. It’s like an event! It was an every summer night occurrence for me when I was growing up. But living in the city, you’re not going to see them. So it makes sense that people would seek out a space to watch fireflies.

That, actually, was one of my favorite scenes [to film]. We went to that town, [Tatsuno in Nagano prefecture], that’s maybe an hour and a half outside of Tokyo. Their whole economic system is based on the tourist season that occurs around fireflies. They have a huge, week-long festival for fireflies. We got there a week after the festival had ended. [The festival, *Hotaru Matsuri*, happens in late June.]

It’s a park you pay to get in. At 7:45 on





the dot, these fireflies just [makes explosion sound and uses her hands for emphasis], just blow up. The security guard we were talking to said it was a really slow night there [yet] there were about 600 people in the park. It was an amazing experience. It was really magical to watch the fireflies.

What is your filming background? It's not something you just jumped into, correct?

No, I went to school for filmmaking, biology, ecology, and botany. I've always wanted to make films about ethno-biology, the way that whole cultures interact with the natural world. I grew up always in the city. And I grew up watching nature documentaries. But the nature documentaries that I watched had nothing to do with the world that I knew. Nature was so rarefied. Or, maybe it was some guy in the wild wrestling alligators. That had nothing to do with what I knew either. So for me what's important with my films is that they are accessible for people that don't have any experience in nature at all.

Working in the butterfly exhibit at the Natural History Museum, you hear more kids ask if the butterfly is broken than if it's dead. Which to me is a pretty big sign that there is something wrong with our basic understanding of the natural world. It's a challenge to make something that kids or adults who have spent their lives in the city can look at and say "Oh, they are like me and look at what they're doing."

You aren't saying "Oh, there's the city and then there's nature," as if there's a clear division.

Was it your intent to strip away that dichotomy and say instead, "Hey, there's nature in the city and we need it that way"?

The film is not saying we need anything, it's not an activist film. I'm not trying to



tell anyone to be a certain way. It wasn't something I thought about. To me it was more to show the people as themselves. Actually, scratch that. It was less in either direction. It was more about just getting people to look at it. Not trying to take away the dichotomy, or highlight the dichotomy, but just get people to notice it.

Dr.Yuro has a lot of fascinating things to say in the movie, and he



has a wonderful voice. Yet there is always the concern when you focus on "differences" in a culture that you risk "exoticizing" that culture or "over-essentializing" it. Was that on your mind?

One of the reviewers said that I took it as "Aren't these people weird?!" and that was what the film was like. Which to me is totally not what the film was supposed to be like.

It was important for me that I played with how they're catching bugs and taking them out of the wild and they are keeping them as pets and they're killing them and pinning them. That was as important to me as the fact that they also revered them and that they have municipal policy to save their habitats. To me, they aren't on a pedestal. They still have the same trouble that we have.



It was a difficult thing to do because they are very different from us. Basically I think a lot of it stems from the Judeo-Christian syndrome that we suffer from, that is so present in our lives. . . Most of the people I know don't consider themselves religious people, and yet they still act in the same way with this idea of dominion over nature. That's still something they believe in even though they would never connect that with such biblical terms. And I think in that way Japan is very different from us.

Working with nature rather than . . .

...Against it. Yeah.

The part where you bring in the Zen garden underscores that. Initially I wondered why that was coming into the film, but then it fits with that idea of working with nature.

It's actually interesting because *The Cove* [the 2009 documentary about the annual killing of dolphins in a Japanese National Park in Taiji, Wakayama, which won the Academy Award for documentaries in 2010] has played at the same film festivals as my film. And there was actually a double feature. I don't think it was intentional but our films played back to back at a film festival in North Carolina. It was a very strange double feature. But I like the idea of the two films together because they represent these two totally disparate sides.

And in that way it is a great double feature because it keeps you from saying "See, everything's good here. Or the other way, "See, everything's bad here." It's way more complicated than that. So in so many ways it's the perfect double feature.

beetlequeen.com/

