



Dérives **presents**

CENTURY OF SMOKE

A film by Nicolas Graux

PRESS KIT

SYNOPSIS

Laosan, a young family man, spends all his time smoking opium. For his community, lost in the heart of the Laotian jungle, opium farming is the only way to survive. But opium is also the poison that puts men to sleep and kills their desires.



TECHNICAL SHEET

Original title Century of Smoke

Completion date 2018

Duration 90 minutes

Countries Belgium - France

Language Akha

Subtitled versions VOSTENG + VOSTFR + VOSTNL

Filming location Laos

Filming format DCP 5.1

Projection format 2K 1.85 :1

Director Nicolas Graux

Image Thomas Schira

Sound Nicolas Graux

Director's Assistant Jianhua Wang "Aryoeq"

Editing Lenka Fillnerova

Sound editing and mixing David Vranken

Producer Julie Freres

Production manager Vincent Terlinchamp



SILENT STORIES SILENT SUFFERING

The map of world cinema still has its unknown areas, its regions which filmmakers haven't attempted to put on screen yet. Laos, a small landlocked country in Southeast Asia, bordered by Vietnam, Thailand, China, Myanmar and Cambodia, is one of those untouched areas that have stories to tell, but whose stories we never hear. Belgian director Nicolas Graux immersed himself for several weeks at a time in order to listen to those stories, in particular to that of Laosan, a young man, married with two children, who is addicted to opium.

The young man's addiction doesn't come from nowhere. On the contrary. As Laosan tells us in the second half of the film, the family grows the highly profitable plant. The plantations in themselves don't cause the people to get addicted, but a lot of men in this Akha society are. Laosan's parents, he tells us, became addicted after the death of his brother. They didn't know how to handle their grief. Akha's wouldn't speak about their feelings, their emotions, he says. Opium thus became a relief, an escape into a world where their sadness became numbed. This is only part of the story, however. The core of Graux's film focuses on Laosan himself and the ways in which his opium addiction affects not only his own life but also that of the people, of the loved ones, around him.

Graux uses breathtaking long-takes in order to situate us in the milieu the Akha are living in. Tight, almost suffocating close-ups are replaced with wide open shots of the jungle. Low-hanging clouds are moving along the horizon. Laosan is a heavy smoker, he tells us. As soon as withdrawal effects are setting in, he needs to tackle them by smoking again and, more importantly, smoking more. We see him preparing the drug, we see him inhaling and exhaling. We see the smoke that leaves his mouth and his nostrils. The repeated shift between close-ups and long shots resembles Laosan's smoking process; the film inhales and exhales. The low-hanging clouds become a mirror for the opium smoke that infests a substantial number of Graux's frames.

Century of Smoke is an aesthetically pleasing, visually stunning piece. But it is also much more than this. Graux lays open the problems of opium addiction in Akha society. Laosan is an absent husband and father. He doesn't know what to do with his life, seems bored and appears subdued. He has lost all energy, all perspective for the future. There seems to be no future. He is almost lethargic. His parents, especially his father, urge him to move away from the region and to build a new life somewhere else. Laosan's father reiterates time and again that the region they live in had nothing more to offer, and that his son

would need to make a move. The dialogue between parents and son, shot in an extensive long-take, is ironic in some ways. The father, himself addicted to opium, scolds his son for losing all interest in making something out of his life. It is clear that the problem is the opium, and yet the father doesn't mention it. Opium – the elephant in the room.

Graux captures a heart-breaking sequence that focuses on the women in the village. It is they who suffer the most. They speak of their horror witnessing the drastic change in their husbands. They speak of their fears of being beaten because opium makes their husbands violent. They speak of wanting to leave their miserable lives behind, of going to China, of looking for a new man, a new job. Laosan's wife reveals her thoughts of suicide because she can no longer endure this life. It's her children who hold her back. Who would look after them? she wonders. Her plan, she tells us, is to move away as soon as her children are old enough. Until then, she will be locked into a tiring fight against this disease, this addiction that has changed the face of the region.

But perhaps there is hope. The Laotian government seeks to prohibit the growth of opium. Laosan, marked by over a year of addiction, is hoping for this change, which would give him the chance to finally come off it. For the young man, being surrounded by opium is counterproductive to any attempt at freeing himself from those chains. He puts his hopes into the government, into the prohibition of opium in the country, in order to get clean. It is, perhaps, the desire of a vast number of people. Laosan is only one of many. Graux allows him to tell his story. His camera is a patient observer, a patient listener, which stylistically also reiterates the idea of lethargy. Cinematic slowness becomes an expression of each and every lethargic day spent in the mountains and hoping for better days to come.

With three short films to his name, Graux plunges into the world of feature-length documentary and he walks in the steps of big-name slow-film directors. With Century of Smoke, he has arrived at the very heart of Slow Cinema, and he sits comfortably amongst directors such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lisandro Alonso and Tsai Ming-liang.

Nadin Mai

Critic at The Art(s) of Slow Cinema and Founder of tao films

INTERVIEW WITH NICOLAS GRAUX

Nadin Mai : You have just completed your first feature documentary and have three short films to your name. What inspired you to make films? When did you begin to venture into filmmaking?

Nicolas Graux : I have always been drawing, writing stories, poetry, or experimenting with aesthetics. Somehow, cinema had always been present underneath all this. But for a long time, it seemed out of reach. I started literary studies at university, but I couldn't stand the academic approach to teaching anymore and I was lacking stimulation and a sense of challenge — or even danger. So I quickly dropped out and entered the Institute of Media Arts, in the directing department.

When it comes to the need itself, it has a lot to do with how to simply 'live'... or how to 'process' reality. For me, filmmaking has a function similar to memory or dreams. The burden of emotions, the fragmentary impressions that linger in my memory, the continual traumas of life experience, can be consciously worked on, assembled and transformed in a way that alleviates the lack of meaning and closure. The emotional experience is shaped into a fixed time-frame, which eventually allows it to be shared with others. It is at the same time a sort of coping mechanism and an urge to push the experience of living to a higher degree of intensity, beyond the mundane surface. In that way, it is also a drug. Whether I am digging into my own experience or into that of the people I'm drawn to, reality and fiction are always intimately merged in the process.

Century of Smoke is set in Laos, a country that is underrepresented not only in cinema alone. Laotian voices, their stories and even their history, too, are absent, silent even. What brought you to Laos?

Ten years ago, on a trip through Southeast Asia, I arrived in Laos and, changing my travel plans, I decided to extend my stay there as long as I could. There was something magnetic, but also persistently frustrating in my first encounter with that landlocked, mist-shrouded country. Something wouldn't let me go. Back home, I started to learn the language and I'd go back there every summer. I became increasingly obsessed with one particular, hard-to-reach zone close to the Chinese border. Only mountains, hidden villages scattered in the forest, isolated ethnic minorities living on the margins of society. Again and again, I'd find myself back in that zone, walking through the jungle, sleeping in villages, drawing my maps. The vision of the smoke rising from the roofs at dusk aroused in me an

overwhelming, irrational sense of belonging. The desire of the film was growing.

It finally took shape in 2012, when I met Laosan and his family, who belong to the Akha tribe and still live from opium cultivation. A mutual complicity began to form and strengthened over the years. At the same time, I saw the face of the region change dramatically. The government sold most of the land to China, which has been sucking Laos' natural resources causing profound environmental and social changes. Behind the nice-looking surface, Laos remains an extremely poor and dislocated country, silenced and cut-off from the media under the strong grip of a dictatorship.

The film contains some beautiful imagery. The sheer beauty of nature is breathtaking. But I can imagine that the filming process wasn't as easy and as straightforward as it might look like. What challenges did you face during the filming process?

The film was made without any authorisations. It would have been impossible through an official way. The authorities are very suspicious towards the ethnic minorities, and drug trafficking and opium cultivation are extremely sensitive issues. I had already been in trouble with the local police several times in the past, when they caught me simply walking in that border area. So we had to handle everything - our presence, the choice of our filming equipment - with great care and discretion. The shooting took place over two periods of roughly two months each, with a one-year gap in-between. It was scheduled that way to allow us a first rough pass in the editing room midway.

We were a very small team — three people, that's already the maximum a village that small could handle for such extended periods. The village is located 40 km away from the district's main road. To reach it, no other way than walking, with 60 kg of equipment in our backpacks, including our own solar panels. Once there, we usually stayed the whole time at Laosan's family house. At some point, our prolonged presence awoke underlying tensions between the village's families, and it is only thanks to the great diplomatic skills of our interpreter, himself an Akha from China, that we could de-escalate the situation.

Each time, we shot during the rainy season when heavy rains alternate with low-hanging mists. Nature exudes and appears in full power. The forest surrounding the village offers few open views, the space feels immense and claustrophobic at the same time, like in a fever. It is a daily struggle for people to inhabit that space — these sensations had to be part of the film. But the rainy season, the

permanent humidity, the lack of sunlight to charge our batteries, was also technically and physically challenging.

There are directors who know from the planning stage how their film would look like. There are others who find the most suitable aesthetics during the actual filming process. How did you approach *Century of Smoke*?

The process needs to be slow. I may have written pages and pages during the search for funding, but once we are there, all we have left are mere guidelines. We try to be always present and perceptive, and to work in the most suitable way in relation to the individual scenes or shots. We take care of having the point-of-view of the camera, the angle, and the shot distance, in tune with what is filmed, so that something truthful and evocative can arise. It's very organic, much depends on sheer intuition, and sometimes the aesthetics are dictated by the most down-to-earth reasons. Of course there is a solid base of research and immersion, but the reality we are filming will always remain, at least partly, a mystery. It is like a half-opened door, there will always be something impenetrable.

I experienced that very strongly with *Century of Smoke*. Even though I tried to share their point-of-view and to be on the 'right side', there was an abyss that I needed to acknowledge. Working from within that abyss actually becomes a driving force in shaping the film's aesthetics. What will be inside and outside the frame, where is the off-screen limit? How to transcend the anthropological, descriptive way of depicting reality, through the sensory and the evocative? How to draw a form of narrative in tune with their situation, when the linear, drama-driven schemes don't apply? I needed to take great care of these questions and work moment by moment. Of course it's a risky approach, there is no script, so you need to have time on your side and sometimes allow for things to naturally emerge which could seem troubling in regard to my preconceptions, but are in fact more interesting.

***Century of Smoke* allows the viewer to be immersed in the beauty of nature, but also in the daily life of the protagonist, Laosan. This immersion is important, albeit not always easy to achieve. How did you achieve this proximity to the people?**

Mutual trust is the most important thing. Without it, there would be no film. It was far from easy to achieve, especially when it comes to the opium itself. Opium addiction is at the heart of the film, but it is only very late through the shooting process that Laosan actually allowed us to film him smoking. Like most of his fellow villagers, Laosan knows that the opium cultivation on which they subsist is illegal and violently repressed by the authorities, and there is a high degree of suspicion regarding any initiative or any person coming from the

outside. But more than that, Laosan is extremely lucid about the damages his addiction causes to himself and to his loved ones — which makes him, I think, a truly tragic character. Even though opium-smoking is an integral part of the daily life and often happens in plain sight, there is a deep-rooted sense of shame, which was only possible to surpass by patiently building that mutual trust and strengthening it day after day. It's work, it's based on long-term companionship, communication, compassion... And again, I have to mention the talent of our interpreter, Ayoe, who largely contributed to crafting this delicate mutual space.

***Century of Smoke* is an intimate film, which tells an intimate story. The interviews you conducted with Laosan and his entourage help personal thoughts and emotions to surface. I'm thinking in particular of a lengthy sequence in which several women speak about their devastation over the addiction of their husbands. Going this deep with a film raises ethical question as to the authentic representation of the people without trying to manipulate the story in such a way that it suits the viewer best. How do you, as a filmmaker, negotiate the ethics of documentary filmmaking during and after the film shoot?**

When we're working without a script or a shooting plan, questions about ethics arise in front of our eyes all the time. We can't run away from them, because we're working from within the moment. The sequence you mention is a good example. Scenes like that, women meeting in the neighbour's house when the husband is away, happen occasionally. It's very informal. We had invited some of them to come together, including Laosan's wife, and talk about their respective families' situation and their husbands, knowing they may have a lot to say. We promised them that everything they'd say would stay between us. That was our 'framework'. Some were very eager to come, some declined. They talked for over two hours, first to us, then to each other, and we filmed almost without interruption. Only our interpreter understands exactly what they say, he can guide us quietly as we film and he re-orientates the discussion when he feels it is appropriate or necessary — it's also a matter of trust and silent understanding between us.

But it was only afterwards, when we translated the footage, that I fully realised what those women had said. Those women's experience and the way in which they express it, is something I could never have written or even imagined. There is such a deep need for them to speak out, the film served as a pretext to open up a mutual space in which they could reflect on their sufferings and let them be heard, and that's precious. Unfortunately, we learned the next day that one of the women who took part in our reunion later got beaten by her husband, a nervous opium addict who seemed to have some grudge against us. It affected us very strongly. It questioned our responsibility as filmmakers, the collateral damages our presence creates.

Should we interfere, get involved in acts beyond mere compassion? It is painful and frustrating to say, but no, we can't. Reality is an abyss, this is what I meant. We have to acknowledge it, we are almost powerless. Maybe this is why we need film as a sort of derivative.

When it comes to the editing of a sequence like this, it is long and complex — as much as finding its right place within the macro-structure of the film. We approached it in a way that felt faithful to the inner rhythm of the moment. If you remain intimately connected to that rhythm, you feel when something isn't right. But, of course, we choose, reject, restructure... It is a representation, there is a certain degree of manipulation involved — which doesn't mean that the scene and what it carries cease to be authentic, on the contrary! Representation allows for the truth to come out more sharply, so that the viewer can receive the tragedy of those women.



NICOLAS GRAUX DIRECTOR



Nicolas Graux was born in 1988 in Liège, Belgium. Passionate about film, he graduated from IAD in 2012 with a Master in Film Directing. His graduation film, *Boy with the Devil*, between fiction and sensory experience, was shown in several festivals across Europe. In 2013, he co-founded the production society Replica, within which he created the video installation *The Flat Colony*, about a decaying communist fresco. His short fiction film *After Dawn* (2017), shot in Poland, deals with homosexual desire on the backdrop of a repressive society. *After Dawn* was selected in more than thirty international film festivals, including Premiers Plans d'Angers, Sarajevo and Palm Springs. In parallel, Nicolas has been working for several years on a long documentary project set in a remote area of Laos plagued by opium, *Century of Smoke* (2018).

RELEASE DATES AND EVENTS

JUNE 26

Palace theater Brussels

National Competition at Brussels International Film Festival

JUNE 27

Galleries theater Brussels

National Competition at Brussels International Film Festival

SEPTEMBER 4

Les Grignoux Liège

With the participation of Michael Hogge (Eurotox) and the Professor Jérémy Hamers (Documentary Master - University of Liège)

SEPTEMBER 5

Flagey Brussels

With the participation of Olivier Ducourtieux (Master of Conferences at Paris Agrotech)

SEPTEMBER 11

Flagey Brussels

Official release date with the director and all the technical crew

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