

What *TIME* Got Wrong About *The Last of Us*



YOU'RE not going to find deep-sea fish if you're staring between your legs while knee deep in the neighbour's wading pool. And you're probably not going to get gripping photographs of dust-covered residents of a post-apocalyptic Boston if you're sending your photographer into a videogame.

That's the sort of misunderstanding that typically comes out of traditional media outlets attempting to import their practices and modes of production into a medium that it does not particularly lend itself to. But *TIME Magazine* tried to do just that. They sent Ashley Gilbertson, a war photographer who has done extensive work in Iraq, on assignment to take pictures of characters in *The Last of Us* with the game's new Photo Mode while running willy-nilly from the infected. But it doesn't work. The pictures that Gilbertson presents in his online *TIME* article don't seem to be affected by the same gravitas that his other pictures carry. Taking pictures of soldiers in a war zone just isn't the same as taking pictures of characters in a videogame.

One can appreciate where Gilbertson and *TIME* are coming from: *The Last of Us* presents a *mise en scène* that echoes the geopolitical rumblings of our own very real world. Viral outbreaks of endemic proportions and the effects and waging of war are themes that have been worked through over and over

again in various media, and not just in videogames. It would seem that bringing Gilbertson into the fray would make for an interesting match, given his haunting and insightful coverage of the American war effort in Iraq from 2003–08 in the photo essay "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot." But In Gilbertson's own words, "None of the game's characters show distress, and that to me was bizarre—it's a post apocalyptic scenario, with a few remaining humans fighting for the survival of their race!" He's having trouble with making his images—trouble he's never had before—and he puts it down to the limits of the videogame: the emotive limitation of polygons that make up the game's characters, and having to play the role of a "perpetrator of extreme, and highly graphic, violence." The problem doesn't emerge from



the technical or ethical fidelity of *The Last of Us* as a videogame, but from a gross misunderstanding of digital media by traditional media.

This is not to say that photography, or any other sort of visual journalism has no place in videogames or vice-versa. In 2009, Upian and Arte France produced “Prison Valley,” an interactive documentary that won the 1st prize for the World Press Photo’s Interactive Production category in 2011; more recently, Al Jazeera produced “Pirate Fishing” (2014), which invites the viewer to take on the role of an investigator tasked to find an illegal fishing trawler. Both are web documentaries that have game-like elements woven into their narratives to pull the viewer in, asking them to piece the story together themselves. One might point out that these are barely videogames, and are unrelated to videogame coverage like Gilbertson’s photo-essay. But the point is this: that the relationship between traditional (journalistic and otherwise) media and videogames is not one where each can simply plug-

and-play into the other. Building an experience that makes sense when dealing with meshing “real” and videogame worlds needs to be carefully done.

Gilbertson’s photographs of *The Last of Us* seem out of place because the boundaries between the “real” and videogame worlds have been misinterpreted. To understand why his photographs are problematic in this specific context, we would have to indulge in a little bit of poetry. Of what makes a photograph, Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*:

All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.

We shouldn’t take Sontag literally, but what she says makes sense. The emotional sledgehammer that hides behind Gilbertson’s pictures of Iraq is held by the shadow of perishability that looms behind every photographic subject framed by his camera.





It's not a question of if the photographed subject or object will die, but when will it die. The soldiers in "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot" will no longer be there when he comes back to the same spot later, nor will the physical place stay the same. Dust moves, and you will never step in the same river twice — the "real-world" is one that is constantly decaying and re-growing itself. This is unlike a videogame, where — in Gilbertson's words — you can "freeze time" and re-play the same scenario again and again. Which is why when displaced from a "real-world" environment and placed in a videogame, Gilbertson finds it difficult to make his images. He laments:

I shot through a dirty window at one point trying to emulate the refugee-in-bus-window-at-border-crossing image, but the subject, my virtual daughter, didn't have the required expression of distress.

It is not so much the lack of "required expression of distress" that plagues this photographer, but the much larger problem of attempting to photograph in a medium that does not lend itself to photographic capture. The digitally generated world that he attempts to capture here has no half-life, no expiry date unless you consider the decay of the hardware that runs it.

So, no. You can't photograph a game the way Gilbertson would photograph an actual war zone, and perhaps it's time we stopped trying to pretend

that we can. Instead of treating videogames as a medium merely

mimics the way our world works, we should be trying to reach a new understanding of videogames. Alexander R. Galloway, videogames scholar, proposes that "[i]f photographs are images, and films are moving images, then videogames are actions." He adds:

Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the active participation of players and machines, videogames exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted.

In short, videogames need to be played in order for them to work. The value of a videogame does not lie only in its aesthetic or in its code, but a coming to life through the act of play. It is this element of play that both *TIME* and Gilbertson miss out on. It is also why GIFs, YouTube, and Twitch.tv are the platforms of choice for showing off how awesome (or terrible) videogames are: they show us not only how the games look like (as a photograph or screenshot would), but also how a videogame can affect us. An attempt to bring journalism, or any other form of traditional media, into videogames needs to understand this, and not try to simply squeeze an "expression of distress" out of pixels.

Images via *TIME Magazine*

Araki's



Fig. 1 Araki's wedding photograph (left); Photograph of Yoko, Araki's wife (right).



Fig.2 Yoko, Araki's wife, (left) sleeps on a boat during their honeymoon; An intimate photograph of Yoko (right).

FLOWERS are important figures in Araki's work, whether as an overt Rorschach test drawing the ever obvious line between the visual and functional parallel between flowers and human genitalia, or as a playful turning of tables by bowdlerising the vagina¹. It is this play on double meanings that characterises Araki Nobuyoshi as a photographer² and an artist.

Often compared with Daido Moriyama³, Araki presents a mystifying force within the Japanese fine art world. They are not opposites, but contrapositions: Araki plays *iron* to Moriyama's *alazon*. Araki's often excessive pictures are placed in stark contrast to Moriyama's photographs which "consistently evoke dark, struggling identity-in-the-making"⁴. But the two seem to get along fine, Moriyama himself stating his admiration for Araki in *Arakimentari*⁵. Marco Francioli, the director of the Museo d'Art, Lugano where Araki's work was exhibited, writes in the introduction of *Araki: Love and Death* — a book meant to accompany the exhibition — that Araki's work is "unclassifiable"⁶. Guido Comis, in the same book, juxtaposes Araki's work with Western photography saying that Araki's

- 1 *ARAKIMENTARI*. Directed by Travis Klose. 2004.
- 2 Fuyumi, Namioka. "Conversation with Nobuyoshi Araki." In *Araki: Love and Death*, by Namioka (ed.) Fuyumi and Francesca (ed.) Bernasconi, 373–381. Lugano: Silvana Editoriale; Museo d'Arte: della Città di Lugano, 2010.
- 3 Oborn, Stacy. "The philosopher and the trickster: Daido Moriyama and Nobuyoshi Araki." *Lens Culture: Photography and Shared Territories*. <http://www.lensculture.com/oborn.html> (accessed October 10, 2012).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *ARAKIMENTARI*.
- 6 Francioli, Marco. "Introduction." In *Araki: Love and Death*, by Namioka (ed.) Fuyumi and Francesca (ed.) Bernasconi, 1–17. Lugano: SilvanaEditoriale; Museo d'Arte: della Città di Lugano, 2010.

Flowers

works “do not constitute a dissonant element with regards to the politically correct ideology of the West, but make a game of it”⁷. It is this “game” of it that truly befuddles those who see his work as just crass, misogynistic, and simply truly lewd. And his work is really all of the above, but much more than their sum because it is this exact play in his work — this absurd childlike glee at making the images that he makes that absolutely shines through in his photographs — that flips the question back at the one looking at his photographs: “Are you sure that you’re not the *perverted* one?”

But that just might be me. Araki might not be concerned at all with the moral fibre of his pictures or their possible pornographic value. As Moriyama puts it:

Either [his photography] was categorized as a piece of art, or as dirty pornography ... But Araki rejected that idea completely. They are not separate things. He combined the two beautifully.⁸

But the pictures of tied up naked women, colourful and brimming with the auteur’s touch, do not seem to function so much as Araki’s main body of work as much as it acts to frame the most important “flower” in the work. In “Sentimental Journey/Winter Journey”⁹ is a series of photographs whose

7 Comis, Guido. “The Insatiable. Nobuyoshi Araki in the Context of Western Art.” In *Araki: Love and Death*, by Namioka (ed.) Fuyumi and Francesca (ed.) Bernasconi, 365–371. Lugano: SilvanaEditoriale; Museo d’Arte: della Città di Lugano, 2010.

8 Moriyama, Daido, interview by Travis Klose. *Arakimentari* (2004).

9 Fuyumi, Namioka. “Nobuyoshi Araki, Three Sentimental Journeys.” In *Araki: Love and Death*, by Namioka (ed.)



Fig.3 (I think this work is called DEAD SKY). The work is shot and published just after Yoko’s death, and speaks not only of the immense catharsis that Araki seeks through his photographs, but also the immense void that he had to fill with Yoko gone.



Fig.4 Screenshot from *ARAKIMENTARI*. The photograph shown was boiled to form the bubbles seen here, made as a tribute to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings.

subject is Yoko, Araki's late wife (Fig.1). The series was published after his wife's death in 1990. The work is a sobering break from the rest of his work, both in the sense that it is a respite from his usual visual barrage and at the same time a series of work that is completely disjointed from it. The photographs offer a glimpse of the quiet tenderness with which Araki sees his wife. The photographs feature Yoko's own favourite picture¹⁰, one of her napping on a boat (Fig. 2, left). Another photograph shows Yoko, posthumous, in her coffin and covered with flowers. It is said that Araki's ran to her hospital bed with a bouquet of flowers that hadn't bloomed. They flowered when she passed away later that day, and he placed the blooms in her coffin, along with other mementos (Figure 5, right). All these he captured in his photographs, which while unsurprisingly honest, are heartbreakingly earnest in documenting his love for her.

Fuyumi and Francesca (ed.) Bernasconi, 349-355. Lugano: SilvanaEditoriale; Museo d'Arte: della Città di Lugano, 2010.
10 *ARAKIMENTARI*.

It is hard to imagine such sentiment when one first looks through Araki's oeuvre of over 450 books¹¹. One always sees the naked ladies first. In *ARAKIMENTARI*, he blatantly touches his models during the course of his work — presumably with their consent. One model is shown on film giggling away during such a shoot. One must then wonder if it is we who are close minded, who are prudish in the face of someone that is ostensibly without malice. And perhaps one could say that he is one who indeed works with his hands, that intimacy through touch is part of an ethos that permeates his work.

ARAKIMENTARI brings us into Araki's own archives, where a massive number of Araki's prints are kept. He professes an affinity with film, saying, "Photography will be killed by digital cameras"¹². The contact sheets and photographic prints are not simply images, but artefacts that trace his life. As he digs through the countless shelves of his work, he finds a pair of prints stuck together. Fussing with it a little, he then pulls them apart causing the surface fibres — and the photographs themselves — to tear, and proclaims that the prints look much "nicer" now¹³.

It is this imminent and inevitable decay that comes with the medium that perhaps causes Araki to declare that he wants to remain the "last 'film' artist". In his interview with Fuyumi Namioka in 2010, he says, "And this may sound paradoxical, but digital images do not allow you to make changes in the same way as you do for film."¹⁴ For a generation of photographers inundated with digital editing tools, Araki would strike one as a luddite. But one must note that Araki does not care for editing his photographs, or at least in the sense that can be replicated digitally. The strength of his photographs lie in their rawness and their pure materiality. It is

11 Tomo, Kosuga. "NOBUYOSHI ARAKI." *Vice*. <http://www.vice.com/read/nobuyoshi-araki-118-v15n7> (accessed October 11, 2012)..

12 Fuyumi, "Conversation with Nobuyoshi Araki"

13 *ARAKIMENTARI*.

14 Fuyumi, "Conversation with Nobuyoshi Araki"



Fig. 5 Chiro (left), Araki's cat whose presence in his work merits his own essay; Yoko at her funeral, covered in mementos.

a materiality that can be best seen and felt through the photographs that Araki pointedly “changes” (or some would say, destroy): he paints on his pictures (Fig. 3), and boils them to create images for the anniversary of the Atom bomb (Fig. 4)¹⁵. He needs to work with his hands, needs to physically mark his photographs by touching them, by inserting (lewd and sentimental objects). He literally “makes” his pictures, just like in his last picture of his wife (Fig. 5), where a carefully inserted flower that he brought on his last visit to her lies in the top left corner of her coffin, alongside a picture of a book Araki published that she never saw in her lifetime.

In an interview with Jérôme Sans¹⁶, Araki says:

I have nothing to say. There's no particular message in my photos. The messages come from my subjects, men or women. The subjects will convey what there is to say. I have things to photograph, so I've nothing to express.

He refuses to be understood, and it would be futile to assign meaning that he seems intent on eluding. But perhaps to pick on that would be to miss the point of his photographs — photographs that are undeniably human, undeniably him, and also undeniably centered around a sense of loss that he circles and pushes through. His unique brew of “visual verocity”¹⁷ makes for a work that stares time and the decay that time brings in the eye, daring it to take more away from him, because he'll simply photograph it.

15 (Author's note: This segment needs substantial revision and elaboration. I wrote this 2 years ago and no longer have the book where I've gotten these images from. It will take some time)

16 Oborn.

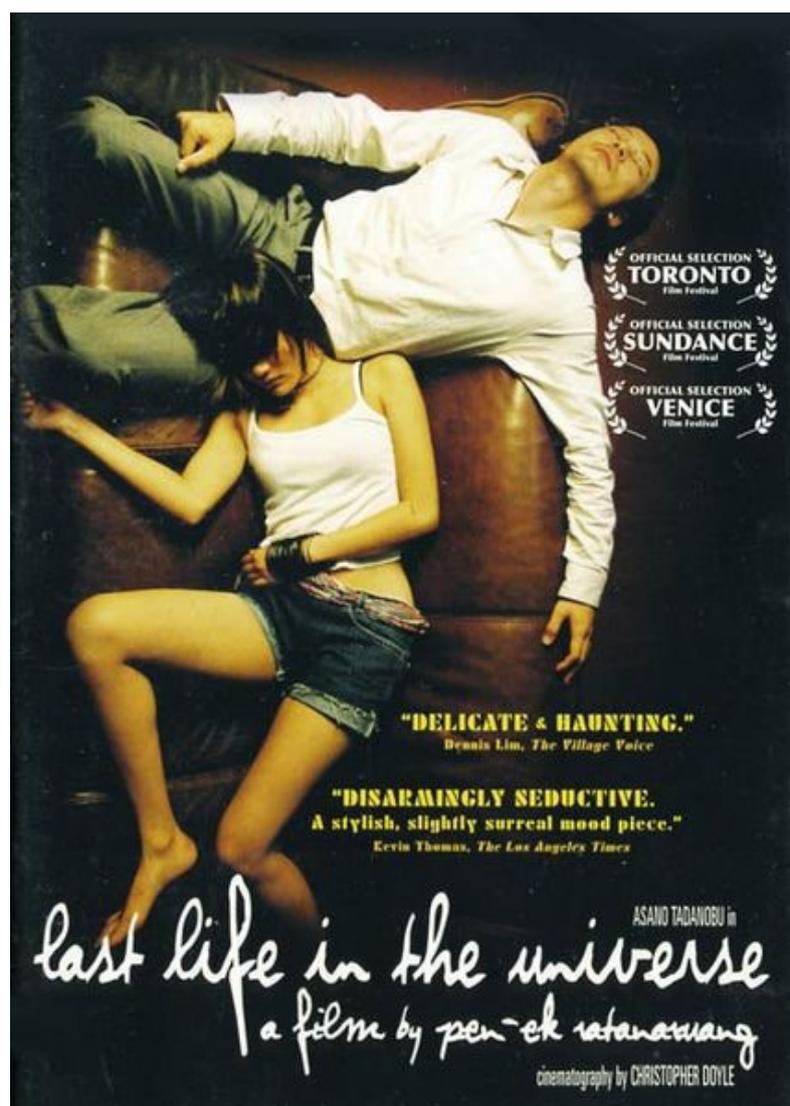
17 Comis.

The lizard wakes up and finds he's the last lizard alive. His family and friends are all gone. Those he didn't like, those who picked on him in school, are also gone. The lizard is all alone. He misses his family and friends. Even his enemies. It's better being with your enemies than being alone. That's what he thought. Staring at the sunset, he thinks. "What is the point in living... If I don't have anyone to talk to?" But even that thought doesn't mean anything... when you're the last lizard.

MY FRIENDS tend to know the sort of film I go for: slow, contemplative, vaguely themed, with high potential to emotionally wreck the viewer at a really deep level. That list is non-exhaustive, and do not do justice to the films that I really do like, but let's leave it at that for now.

I want to talk about *The Last Life in the Universe* because it is one of those films that grow on you, at first because of its arguably stock post-modern open-endedness (which is not necessarily a bad thing), and later because it's at its heart a film that is truly about the recursive nature of memory.

When I say "recursive", I don't really mean "circular", but at the same time I mean that memory really does circle around itself: that we replay moments in our head, we dream dreams that borrow from our lives (and vice-versa), and Kenji seems to



Mis-Remembering THE LAST LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE

"remember" ("This could be me three hours from now, or maybe not." There is an implication that this would happen somehow, or not happen somehow. Not indecision, or a not knowing, but rather this is Pen-Ek invoking Schrödinger right there and then in the closed box of Kenji's apartment) dying and not dying at the same time.

Rather, *Last Life's* plot spirals outwards, circling itself until it finds that it has run out (of ink, of film, of story, of itself). We begin with Kenji attempting

suicide, attempts that continues to take shape in increasingly untenable and somewhat laughable attempts. He contemplates the noose, the gun (that kills his brother's murderer), the bridge, the knife, lying under the front of Noi's (protagonist B and in-story love interest) car waiting for her to drive off hoping she wouldn't notice. One might argue that his journey back to the apartment unit that he left halfway through the film, and his escape through that window is a closing of that circle somewhat. We

see the Yakuza hunting him burst through two toilet doors (a scene that recalls Tarantino's interrupted-by-toilet-sitters trope in *Pulp Fiction*) only to find a vacated seat and an open window. The drop from there seems pretty steep, and we are never sure if he actually escaped, perished escaping, or is waiting in ambush à la Jason Bourne. So when I say it is a closing of that circle somewhat, I mean that we've ended up where we started in the story, but are in a totally different place altogether: the rope unfurls around Kenji and by the end of it we're left with a gloriously frayed end. (And that moment when Kenji trips over what was left of the noose after waking up on his couch, a little jab by Pen-Ek telling you to pay attention — was that not telling enough?)

The thing about ropes and threads that unfurl is that in real life they don't do it neatly. The way is knotted and tangled. Your fingers follow the thread to find where it goes only to find that where it tangles with the rest of itself has no distinction of fibres. Medium shot: Noi lies down on Kenji's lap. She is her sister's sister, her sister's twin. The camera pans away, and comes back. She is her sister, wearing the blood-stained clothes that she died in (making us wonder, for a moment, what were we thinking? Back then, an older man possibly romancing the nubile young thing in a markedly kitsch Japanese schoolgirl getup, *An Education*-esque, in the library no less?). The next morning, still in her sister's clothes, she burns their uniforms. Medium shot: Kenji is about to hang himself, and sticks a post-it to his right palm. Kenji is opening Yukio's (his brother) "present" without his permission. The door buzzer cuts through the rustling of paper, and doesn't stop. We see his brother enter, again and again, but we never see him leave. Even post-mortem, we never see his body, only a blood-speckled shape bundled underneath the table (presumably held together by the same rope). Memory is recursive, and with every re-cursion, with every re-visit, something changes ever so slightly such that you're never quite sure if you're remembering something, re-remembering

something, or mis-remembering something. Close-up: Kenji thumbs through the pages of *The Last Lizard*, the book Noi was looking at in the library. The book disappears for the rest of the film, and only reappears at the end, where Noi has a visitor who has left what seems to be Kenji's bag with the book peeping out of it. Throughout the film, Kenji asks if Noi has seen the book, which confuses Noi (which is not to say she hadn't seen it) and leads us to wonder if the book was misplaced or simply not picked up in the first place. Remembered, re-remembered, mis-remembered.

By the end of the film:

- Kenji fled through the toilet window (?);
- Kenji is shirtless and detained, with *The Last Lizard*, his passport, a kitchen knife, two pistols, car keys, cigarettes (of which he smokes on tentatively. Kenji, the former Yakuza, who never smoked?), his stash of chopsticks, his book all laid out in front of him;
- Kenji's bag appears in Noi's apartment in Osaka.

We never see him after he takes that bare-chested puff in what looks like a Thai detention centre. After the Yakuza realise that he could have escaped through the window, neither the camera nor Yakuza give chase — the shot instead fades to white (unusual. Perhaps a spiritual metaphor?). We are left wondering: if the film truly did circle around itself, then what Kenji meant by "This is bliss"? "Death is relaxing", but not for the people who died along the way in *Last Life*. Each death in the film is a gesture towards Kenji's own attempts at death. And each death, strangely, "readies" him for his "next" life, his next incarnation that he supposes in the prologue that his suicide would prepare him for. But what he did not anticipate was probably the running out of rope at the end, and the fraying of that end: that he found bliss by actually not looking to die, but by trying to finally live. That perhaps bliss is not the tying of knots, the untying of rope, or the cutting of it, but by running your hands along it and finally reaching a frayed end. Perhaps bliss is mis-remembering.