

“DISTURBING THE FORGETTING”

a Good Symptom curatorial essay by Rana San

Inside each human eye...there is a blind spot where the retina meets the optic nerve. [...] Every person should therefore experience a significant blind spot in his or her visual field—about the size of an orange held at arm's length. And yet, normally sighted people do not walk around with holes in their vision. Somehow the absence is filled.¹

In a reality riddled with disinformation, “artificial hallucination,”² and deleted scenes, the films in *Good Symptom: Volume 4* offer an orange-sized remedy—a cognitive antidote, a visual alternative. Political poem. Improvised monologue. Ardent epizeuxis.³ These three experiments—*MAY 35*, *femmes*, and *Keje*—disrupt the dominant culture of disremembering, surfacing inopportune truths power perpetrators would have us forget.

As I watch, rewatch, reflect, sit with, read, research, consult, and repeat, I find myself more curious than critical, more questioning than certain.

I'm curious about control. Control wielded as censorship, the removal of [subjectively] objectionable content. I'm curious about the sequence of acts, decisions, events, priorities, politics that lead to someone/someplace/something getting cut or making the cut.⁴ Censorship in the context of time: What's left out and where in the process does that happen?

What I mean is, have you experienced erasure?

When? What happened? With whom?

Artist, choreographer, and writer Takahiro Yamamoto posed these questions to me in a 2019 discussion that would form part of his ongoing research about artists' own sense of existence in society, their needs in life, and their embodied daily experiences.⁵

1 Siri Hustvedt, foreword to *Blind Spot*, by Teju Cole (Random House, 2017).

2 When a large language model (LLM) like ChatGPT generates plausible-seeming inaccurate or misleading information, it is said to be “hallucinating.” Filling in the blanks by generating the next word(s) based on what it has already seen.

3 Epizeuxis as a literary tool refers to the repetition of a word or phrase for emphasis and affect. Epizeuxis as an anthem is Erykah Badu's *Phone Down* (“But You Caint Use My Phone,” Motown Records, 2015), an unwavering plea to be present.

4 Whose stories get told? For whom and to what end?

5 [*NOTHINGBEING*](#) (2022) by Takahiro Yamamoto

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Societal dismissal and erasure are censorship in the flesh. Live. Lived. Wherever people's—*certain* people's, and particularly artists'—ideas, movements, (hi)stories, and creations are treated as objectionable content to be erased, a sociocultural sinkhole opens. A devouring blind spot. I struggle to find a suitable antonym for “censorship.”⁶ Filling a void is not the opposite of creating it. Where language falters, these films thrive.⁷

In related news:

The 60th Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival, scheduled for October 2023, was canceled following outrage among (and withdrawal of) film-makers and jurors at the government-backed removal of a documentary feature from the competition—a documentary about a physician and a teacher who were dismissed from their government jobs under a state of emergency after a failed coup attempt in Türkiye in 2016.⁸

Enter, sinkhole. Fatma Belkıs cultivated *Keje* from an anecdotal seed planted at this same festival in 2011.⁹ “It is extremely disappointing that an institution that motivated me to make a critical work on our collective history is non-existent at the moment.”

Who decides what gets cut from the conversation? It seems that whether by omission (what's left out during the making) or erasure (what's overlooked after), the curator, critic, and consumer alike are complicit with the creator in crafting what's remembered. Partners in crime, collaborators. Aware or unwitting.

What the critics¹⁰ are saying:

“Intriguing and thought-provoking, MAY 35 navigates the complexities of history and memory, inviting viewers to question their own perceptions.”

“A poignant cinematic soliloquy, *femmes* stands as a testament to Maria Shuvanova's artistry, shedding light on the imperative recognition of women in art.”

6 “Existence”?

7 “*Good Symptom* offers a way out of imposed reality and fucked up thinking.” “And So We Begin,” M Freeman, Rana San and Chelsea Werner-Jatzke, [Good Symptom: Volume 1](#)

8 “[Turkish film festival cancelled after row over censorship](#),” *Reuters* (2023, September 29), reported by Hüseyin Hayatsever, edited by Cynthia Osterman.

9 “In 2011, as a part of the [Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival] program several meetings and talks were organized on censorship. The “Keje” story was delivered by Abdurrahman Keskiner, *Seyyit Han*'s producer, during one of these talks. I was unable to trace this anecdote in archives or in literature on related subjects. There was no way to fact check this story because it was [Keskiner]'s personal account. I am complicit in that regard.” ~ Fatma Belkıs, on the origins of *Keje*, email exchange with the filmmaker, Nov 27, 2023

10 Reviews generated by ChatGPT-3.5 using each film's logline and the following prompt: *Write a 20 word acclaimed critical review of the film, in the style of Rana San (ex-Northwest Film Forum Artistic Director).* November 2023.

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“Fatma Belkis crafts a poignant cinematic protest with Keje, delving into the nuanced struggles of Turkish women navigating oppressive censorship.”

Before I began writing my first draft of this essay, three friends suggested (independently of each other) that I have ChatGPT write the whole thing. No joke. Do you trust that these are my words?¹¹ How would you know?

What I mean is, have you ever done the erasing?¹²

When? What happened?

As you watch, rewatch, reflect, sit with, read, research, consult, and repeat, consider the interplay of algorithm¹³, authorship¹⁴, and authority¹⁵:

Of the top 50 “Most relevant” Google Reviews for Tiananmen Square, at the time of this writing only one overtly references the June Fourth Incident.¹⁶ The next closest reference crafts a burlesque of the history.¹⁷

Maria Shuvanova’s “monologue” is actually a conversation with friend Sasha Faradzheva, whose immanent presence, unheard and undetectable until the credits, makes the filmmaker’s introspective improvisation

11 I assure you they are. As a curator, your trust matters. As does respect for my editor. But really, *how would you know?*

12 “It feels and is sinister. This occlusion, this erasure, this hiding of what should be an interesting and important moment or person or figure. You want to undo that. For me, I wanted to cause some harm to the document.” ~ Quenton Baker on the origins of *we pilot the blood* (Good Symptom, forthcoming 2024), featuring redacted pages of Senate Document 51 concerning the revolt of enslaved Africans transported aboard the brig *Creole* in 1841. Interview conducted by M Freeman, Anne de Marcken, Rana San, and Chelsea Werner-Jatzke for Experiments in Cinema v18.4. April 2023.

13 “All technology reflects the society that produces it, including its power structures and prejudices. This is true all the way down to the level of the algorithm.” Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020), p23.

14 “[The Media War Between Palestine and Israel – and the Struggle for Humanity](#),” *REDEFINE* magazine (2023, November 30), reported by Vee Hua.

15 In *Masterworks of American Avant-Garde Experimental Film: 1920–1970* (Flicker Alley, 2015), curated and annotated by Bruce Posner, an introductory slide to Marie Menken’s 1957 *Hurry, Hurry!* reads, “In this strange little film, Marie Menken photographs billowy flames superimposed over microscopic medical footage of writhing spermatozoa. Her humorous juxtaposition depicts a fiery death-dance of wily males seeking each other in wanton abandon. Ultimately the film is a poignant reminder of the brevity of life.”

16 “Grand site of the massacre of thousands of innocent peaceful protesters, but you won’t learn about that there or anywhere in China. I wouldn’t even suggest mentioning it there.” ~ Google Review of Tiananmen Square by Kevin O’Brien, posted 3 months ago. 3 stars.

17 “Was back here back in ‘89, there was a big mosh pit/rave thing, even the Chinese military pulled up, but then a guy with shopping bags stood in front of the tanks, so he was totally killing the vibe. Then the tanks started driving at us, and they wanted to join the rave, but everyone started to run away. The vibe was totally ruined, and a lot of people got sent to Astroworld. Anyway, 10/10, would party there again.” ~ Google Review of Tiananmen Square by M Tkachenko, posted a month ago. 5 stars.

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possible. Helps ideas flow and take form.¹⁸

The Committee on Film Censorship determined that Keje, a Kurdish name, was more offensive than the violence inflicted upon the woman by that name. *Il Cinema Ritrovato*'s 2018 review¹⁹ of *Seyyit Han: Bride of the Earth*²⁰ claims: “Seyyit Han is a criticism of feudalism and traditions that silence women.”²¹

Pondering consequences—because there are consequences—my mind whirls at the implications of remix (and the potential for reclamation) and of reductionism (and the certainty of misrepresentation). Blind spots become blanks, waiting for language to arrive.

Without ever having been to Tiananmen Square, thanks to Google Reviews²² I now know:

“Restrooms are near the entrance of the forbidden city.”²³

“Don't necessarily expect to be the most entertained.”²⁴

“Still crowded.”²⁵

“Very clean. A local spat on the ground, but made sure to smear it well with his foot. That's how clean it is.”²⁶

What do you recall about the sites you visit/films you watch/foods you try/art you experience? What sticks? Which of those memories do you share and how much do you rely on the experiences of others?

Asked to consider consequence, Roland Dahwen posits:

18 “The monologue in this film is my actual, natural monologue taken from a conversation with a friend and recorded. I've discovered that when I talk to a person, especially while expressing a certain idea, I tend to say a lot more than when I just conceptualize something in my head to put it on paper.” ~ Maria Shuvanova reflecting on the voiceover in *femmes*, FilmFreeway, October 2022

19 “*Seyyit Han Film Notes*,” *Il Cinema Ritrovato* (2018, June 27).

20 The 1968 feature film by Yılmaz Güney from which *Keje* is derived. While the full film is available to view on YouTube (in Turkish with no English subtitles), the coercion and brutality inflicted upon Keje are so sinister and devastating that I cannot in good conscience recommend it. *Keje* tells the true story.

21 Out of the 334 recorded femicides in Türkiye in 2022, 46% of women were killed by the man to whom they were married. The rest, by their current or past partner, father, son, relative, or brother. Another 200+ suspicious deaths remain unresolved, though a man was always present. (“Veriler.” [We Will Stop Femicide Platform](#). Accessed 14 November 2023.) Can one effectively criticize systems of violence by recreating their images?

22 Would you agree that a review of a place is really a review of a personal, time-stamped experience?

23 Excerpt from Google Review of Tiananmen Square by Paige Smith, posted 4 years ago. 5 stars.

24 Excerpt from Google Review of Tiananmen Square by Neko Ramsay, posted 4 years ago. 3 stars.

25 Excerpt from Google Review of Tiananmen Square by Bariq Ikram, posted 2 months ago. 5 stars.

26 Excerpt from Google Review of Tiananmen Square by Simon D, posted 5 years ago. 3 stars. This excerpt is the continuation of a segment that appears in MAY 35, “THE THING THAT STRUCK ME WAS HOW CLEAN IT IS. VERY CLEAN.”

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*We have turned photographs into words so that we may search them. And by searching, know them. And what cannot be known? [...] A photograph shows us neither what the world is nor what it looks like. A photograph shows us what the world looks like as a photograph. And what cannot be photographed?*²⁷

And sometimes, blind spots become openings, waiting for visual language to be revived. An outcome likely unforeseen by Marie Menken, Maya Deren, Germaine Dulac, Marguerite Duras, or Chantal Akerman is that Maria Shuvanova, a young woman in 2021 Moscow, would be so moved by their creations as to revolt against the biased teachings of her History of Experimental Cinema course, finding and refining her voice as a genre-defying filmmaker/essayist/activist through collaboration and assemblage.

*I felt a sense of justice...I needed to compile everything that I've learned into this work so that I could find my own identity, maybe, as a woman filmmaker also...I wanted to learn from them. It was a collaboration of learning.*²⁸

What I mean is, what will you remember?

When?

What I mean is, what are you not seeing?

Why?

“WHAT IS THE HALFLIFE OF OUR FORGETTING?”²⁹

The opposite of half-life is doubling time.

What I mean is,

show me your orange-sized remedy.

27 From an email exchange with Roland Dahwen, in which he reflects on the following prompt: *What is one (or more) [possible / perceived / concrete / desired / imagined / (un)foreseen / (un)intended / (un)welcome / other] outcome (consequence) of creating this work?* November 2023. A nod to street photographer Garry Winogrand: “I photograph the world to see what the world looks like photographed.” (1974, [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#))

28 Interview with Maria Shuvanova conducted by M Freeman, Anne de Marcken, Rana San, and Chelsea Werner-Jatzke for Experiments in Cinema v18.4. April 2023.

29 Roland Dahwen, MAY 35