

The Otrusive and Bewildering Cinema of Hara Kazuo
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As is the case with most non-Japanese viewers, my introduction to Hara Kazuo's work was the explosive *Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, which I caught at a festival in Los Angeles. I was already an admirer of Japanese cinema, and this was my first Japanese documentary—an initial step into a world that would soon become a passion.

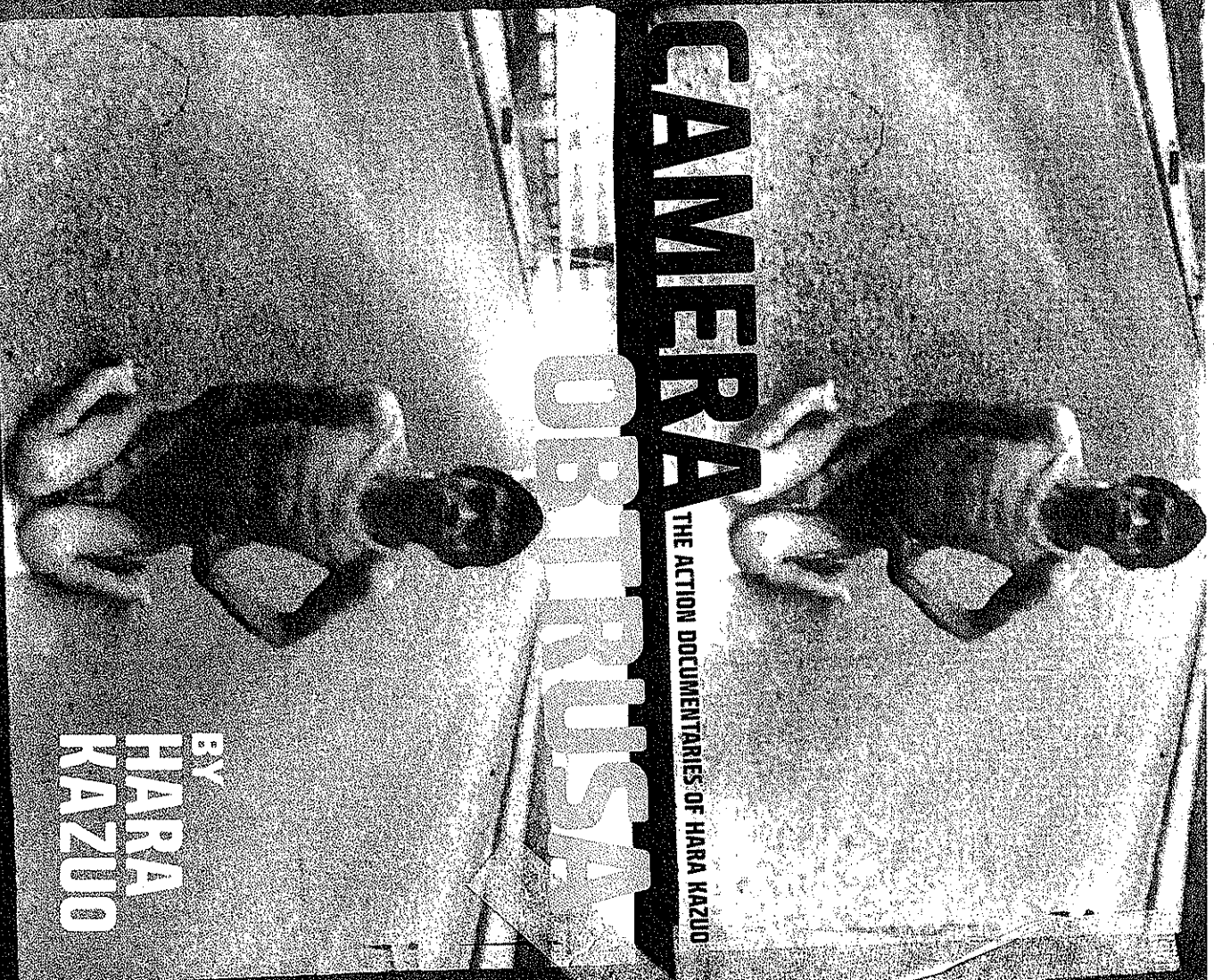
A short but notorious article in *American Film* had brought the film to my attention.¹ The author memorably wrote that the film "swathes the gradual disclosure of a wartime atrocity in the mysteries of Japanese social decorum." This was enough to pique my interest. Unfortunately, the critic followed this provocative description with the cardinal sin of criticism—he gave away the film's dreadful secret (jump to the next paragraph if you have yet to see this remarkable film): "Three weeks after the Japanese surrender," he wrote, "one unit of the 36th Corps executed several privates for their officers to eat."

Needless to say, the screening was one of those riveting experiences of cinema where the film leaves its audience thoroughly stunned. *Speed Racer* had been my first Japanese TV show, *Godzilla* my first Japanese movie, and *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* my first Japanese documentary. All had made an impression, but the last was the experience that changed the course of my life.

I met Hara Kazuo and his wife and producer Kobayashi Sachiko, in the dead of an Iowa winter in 1992. The University of Iowa was holding a conference on Japanese film, and Hara was the honored guest. I was living in Japan, and Hara was on a year-long fellowship in New York. After covering that much ground, our conversation took a somber turn. Documentary filmmaker Ogawa Shinsuke had just passed away, and I had come to the conference directly from the tsuya or wake, an alcohol-fueled Japanese tradition where friends and family stay up all night with the corpse before its cremation. Hara was curious how it had gone, who had come, and especially who had stayed up all night. What a shock, what a pity, we agreed. And we turned to happier topics. Hara was very much the center of attention at this gathering, and I don't

1. Having said my piece on the matter of Hara Kazuo elsewhere, I would like to introduce this director from a more personal perspective. [Norms, Abé Mark. "Private Reality," in *Identity Replays: Realism and Cinema*, ed. Ivonne Margulies (Duke University Press, 2003), 145-163; also "The Postwar Documentary Trace: *Crooping in the Dark*," in *Open to the Public: Studies in Japan's Recent Past*, ed. Leslie Pincus, a special issue of *Positions* 10.1 (Spring 2002): 39-78.]

2. Hoberman, J. "The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On," *American Film: A Journal of the Film and Television Arts* (March 13, 1988): 11.



CAMERA

THE ACTION DOCUMENTARIES OF HARA KAZUO

OBTRUSIVE

BY
**HARA
KAZUO**

know if he gave Ogawa's death another thought. In contrast, I was reeling. I had arrived hoping to escape my grief with the distractions of academia; instead, my encounter with Hara turned my grief academic. It got me thinking about the history of Japanese documentary. Ogawa's sudden death at age 56 had sent a shockwave through the Japanese film community, catching everyone by surprise. The independent documentarians who had achieved prominence in the 1960s were forced to confront mortality, while their fans were abruptly faced with generational difference. Ogawa's generation was passing; indeed, they were making fewer and fewer films. Who would be coming up behind them? Who would be leading the charge?

Hara Kazuo, no doubt. This was what I found myself thinking as he took the stage in Iowa. The landscape of Japanese documentary had experienced something of a convulsion, and I was looking at its new center—or at least its hopeful future.

Needless to say, I kept a close eye on Hara Kazuo after this. We would bump into each other at festivals, or try to catch up over occasional beers in Shinjuku. He made new films, and worked hard to nurture the generation of documentary filmmakers emerging behind him (perhaps a dig at the legacy of Ogawa Shinsuke, who only gave lip service to mentorship).

Yet Hara always expressed great frustration with his students. As one gathers from *Camera Obscura*, he forged his own approach to documentary in reaction to Ogawa's generation; but they still deeply informed his values. I think he saw himself as a bridge between past and future generations, pouring enormous energy into his "Cinema Cram School [Cinema Juku]." Much to his chagrin, his pupils just didn't seem to get it.

As a historian, I always found it fruitful to explore the differences between these successive generations in order to learn about the nature and possibilities of documentary—whether in Japan or elsewhere. Indeed, the example of Hara proved useful for my approach to postwar Japanese documentary in *Forest of Pressure*.³

However, I learned more about Hara himself by comparing him to a U.S. compatriot. This was around the time *Fahrenheit 9/11* arrived in Japan, making quite a splash. During one of our Shinjuku reunions, Hara and I chatted about the film, our respective memories of the attacks, and our very different experiences of the world that had been left in its wake. Starting with his initial election, every move George W. Bush made had left me feeling bruised and battered. *Fahrenheit 9/11* was energizing; it pumped me up for the 2004 election (at which point I felt bashed down once again). Hara, typically, was somewhat bemused, and the film had left him with many questions. Good ones at that.

3 Norries, *Abé Mark, Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

He mentioned an intriguing rumor, something he had picked up at a film festival. It seemed Michael Moore admired his work.

Somehow this was no surprise. Both filmmakers pull the swirling chaos of history into orbit around their peculiar points of view. They step into—obtrude into—history, cameras a-whirring, to see what happens. Their films are records of meetings, interventions by personalities that easily engage or enrage people—both of which responses are always revelatory. Moore may have a stronger onscreen persona, but the presence of both Moore and Hara in the texture of their films is equally palpable. And both have a knack for uncovering things that would otherwise have remained lost to history. Or for provoking things that disclose the past and present world in all its complexity. At the same time, the two seem so utterly different.

Our discussion made Hara want to meet his American colleague, and I suggested that this was something I might be able to arrange. After all, Moore is a proud native of Michigan, and had shown his work to my film students at the University of Michigan. I contacted Moore, and was pleasantly surprised at his response. Although horribly busy with post-production on *Sicko*, he was ready to drop everything for a chance to meet Hara Kazuo.

When they finally appeared on-stage at the Michigan Theater, Ann Arbor's stunning silent movie palace, we found out why Moore had been so quick to accept our invitation. This is how Moore described his discovery of Hara's work:

I was two-thirds of the way through post-production for *Roger and Me*, editing the film just four blocks from the White House and five blocks from the Kennedy Center. They were playing a film that night called *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. I thought that was such a bizarre title for a film. Not that I had an interest in naked armies or anything—I just really wanted to get out of the editing room.

So I walked over there and sat down, and I was riveted for two hours. First, as a lover of movies, but also it was like I had this soul brother in Japan. I don't know if I'd say he was doing a similar thing, but certainly he was using this documentary art form in a way that was very different from Discovery Channel-type fare. I remember walking back that night: I was inspired, I was exhilarated. I had never seen anything like this. I had truly never seen this... I mean it's lonely out there being a regular feature on Fox News, and

anytime I can be made to feel like the conservative one, I'll take it...

Hara was grappling with how to do a documentary in an unconventional way that didn't numb people... To have a kindred spirit, to have someone who has inspired me very early on, and did that completely unbeknownst to himself. I felt after watching that film that I had permission—I gave myself permission—to make *Roger and Me* the way I was making it.⁴

For the next couple of hours, Moore and Hara hashed it out. Exploring each other's work, they simultaneously revealed volumes about themselves. Their many points of convergence clearly made them kindred spirits. At the same time, they were quite different. The following exchange was particularly illuminating:

Hara: For any filmmaker, on top of money, you need a certain energy that sustains you through the arduous process of making a film. I've read in various interviews and books by you that you're often sustained by the anger you have. But I believe you need something underneath that. In my case, what sustains me is the question mark I have about myself. There is something unknown within me that leads me to unfamiliar places, and perhaps I'm afraid of that. But I do have a very strong desire to find out what that is, and when I make a documentary film, I'm not doing it for social justice, or to organize the masses, or to expound some theme, or anything except finding out that question mark within me. Therefore, although I use my camera to shoot my subjects, I'm also carrying the camera toward the inside of myself, and going further and deeper within. Do you do anything like that?

Moore: I actually disagree with you in terms of the anger. I worry that my anger is actually disruptive to myself, to me personally. You said that anger sustains me, but I think it's

⁴ The entire discussion was published in "Dokumentenari to wa Nani na no ka: Maikenu Mōa X Hara Kazuo," *Tsukuru* (September/October 2007); the subsequent text is a revision of my "X-Theme Private Documentary: Michael Moore and Kazuo Hara," *International Institute* (fall 2007): 9.

really my optimistic, hopeful belief that people are good to the core. And to keep one's sense of humor in dark times is a very important thing to do. To keep your soul from collapsing from the anger and the despair that exists... as a filmmaker, I set out to make these films, first and foremost, to express myself artistically, and I always put the art before the politics. Because if you put politics first, you end up, at least in film, with a pretty crappy movie that nobody wants to see.

As this short dialogue suggests, the audience at the Michigan Theater witnessed two of the world's best documentary filmmakers trying to figure each other out. Part of that process involved comparing what they thought about the other with what they understood about themselves. It seemed as though they felt like kindred spirits because of their inclination to interfere with the reality before the camera, and also from their formative experiences in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.

However, this seeming historical simultaneity is in fact more likely a point of departure, as the situations in Japan and America from that era differed in some very fundamental ways. Moore essentially picked up on the political spirit of the era and forged ahead with a cinematic path that paired the first person point-of-view with his now signature use of humor and irony. In contrast, Hara began making films at a time when the student movement in Japan had devolved into shocking violence and feelings of despair and failure. This helps explain why he prefers not to see himself connected to social movements, even while making profoundly political films.

This difference was palpable when an audience member asked about the representation of bodies in documentaries, an interesting question considering Hara's innovative films about cerebral palsy, sex, and war, and Moore's new film on the healthcare crisis. Moore preface his answer with a joke—"Sicko has the first nudity I have ever put in a film, and I just got my rating back from the ratings board, and it's my first PG-13. And it's male nudity, too!" Then he struggled to answer the question. He seemed much more comfortable discussing the challenges of creatively rendering recent history, politics, and the struggles of everyday life.

On the other hand, Hara used the question to think about his relationship to Moore, stating:

This gets to the major difference, as I see it, between Michael's works and mine. What I try to do in documentary

films is really to work towards the emotions of the people in the audience, to energize them. Michael does this through his words, and I think I do it through bodies. I like to leave people in the audience aching and itching in their desire to do something with their bodies after seeing my films. I would like to kidnap their bodies in that way.

On this note, both directors left the stage, and the bodies in the audience were then "kidnapped," just as I had been snatched away fifteen years before, by a screening of *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*.

This sense of abduction is predicated on a bewildered spectatorship. One can see this effect in the dazed faces revealed when the theater lights turn back on. Hara's films have always inspired a strong desire to learn more, to figure out what exactly is going on in these films, and the puzzling ways they work on one's body and soul. The publication of *Camera Obscura* will go far in satiating this hunger to know more, helping Hara's bewildered spectators understand what they are to do next.