

Report on the Workshop “Visualizing Japan: An Investigation of Epistemology and Methodology based on Dialogues with Filmmakers”

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Date: May 16th and 17th

Place: Kyoto University, Faculty of Letters 2F, Lecture Room No. 6.

Program: www.itsushikawase.com/workshop

Host : Kyoto University GCOE program "Reconstruction of the Intimate and Public Sphere in 21st Century Asia"
The Project on the Visual Image and the Intimate/Public Sphere (<http://www.gcoe-intimacy.jp/>)

Introduction

May 16th and 17th 2009 saw the Kyoto University Graduate School of Letters hold the international workshop, “Visualizing Japan”, in conjunction with the Japanese Government-funded Global COE Program “Restructuring the Public and Intimate Spheres” on-going research project; and coordinated by Itsushi Kawase, the provocative director of such films as *Lalibalocco* and *Room 11*, *Ethiopia Hotel*. The weekend provided a rich smorgasbord of participants from across the globe, spanning many disciplines and backgrounds, as well as a diverse range of films of many genres, themes and techniques. This meeting of minds formed very real bonds and will no doubt manifest itself in some groundbreaking collaborations which we ought to look forward to later down the line.

Coordinators :

- Itsushi Kawase (Research Fellow, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science/Kyoto University)
- An van Dienderen (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Royal Academy for the Arts, University College Ghent)

Presenters:

- Marc Hatzfeld (Sociologist, Laboratoire de démographie historique -Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris)
- Alain Saulière (Documentary filmmaker, Ateliers du passeur, Les Vans)
- Thierry Ribault (Project leader: Economist, Clersé-Cnrs-Meshs, Lille)
- Tommi Mendel (Telephone participation) (Filmmaker, University of Zurich)
- Roberto Maxwell (Videographer, Journalist)
- Tamarah Cohen (Associate Professor, Kansai Gaidai University)
- An van Dienderen (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Royal Academy for the Arts, University College Ghent)

Day One: Part One

The first afternoon began with a brief introduction from Mr. Kawase, outlining the importance of our interdisciplinary exchange for the creation of an expanding global network of researchers and filmmakers with special attention given to films and film project dealing with “Japan”.

We heard presentations from three French guests: the economist Thierry Ribault, sociologist Marc Hatzfeld, and documentary filmmaker Alain Saulière; colleagues working on a joint research project entitled “Japanese Youth in Emergency” sponsored by CNRS and MESHS. After an introduction to the project proposal by the leader Mr. Ribault, Professor Hatzfeld took to the stage and presented some clips from his films, “No Problem” and “Doors and Straights”, painting an image of the changes in attitudes within immigrant labourers in France. While the showings were mostly in non-translated French dialogue (with some other languages), Prof. Hatzfeld addressed the importance of focusing on things like the hand movements of the workers, and what kind of interactions are depicted in the workplace. While the content of the films screened in this section were not directly connected to Japan, they gave a vivid impression as to the kinds of themes they would later go on to tackle in their proposed research project focusing on Japanese youth, and also gave us a look at some experimental filmmaking techniques.

Mr. Saulière in particular fielded many comments and questions regarding his screened excerpt, a record of musicians of different backgrounds meeting and performing together such as choir groups and tribal chanters, shot in Morocco. These gave rise to discussions concerning planning and calculating each shot before filming, from a filmmaker’s perspective, versus filming as events unfold without any prior calculations. It also marked the first of many mentions of visual anthropologist Jean Rouch and his landmark techniques, bringing to the table the concept of “mind-editing”, which is that Rouch extensively planned out every image he recorded so that he would not have to edit the film later. He was known for making long cuts out of necessity due to the expense and heft of film and equipment at the time, and this was juxtaposed with Saulière’s method of simply filming everything as it develops, while nobody, not the filmmaker nor the participants can determine the outcome. Debate here arose with regards to whether or not the experiment – both the actual collaboration between the two groups of musicians and the filming method adopted by Mr Saulière – was a success, with the point brought up by Pnina Werbner (Professor, Keele University), that the participants in the film after a long process of trying to synchronize, eventually gave in to the “lowest common denominator” and reveled in that “they could all bang a drum”, thus sparking a heated discussion.



Day One: Part Two

Next, two films, “Down and Out in Osaka” and “Arukihenro” were screened in their entirety. While being of entirely different content, both were fine examples of powerful visualization used for a convincing narrative. A telephone interview with Switzerland-based Tommi Mendel – director of the latter work – followed. Personally, the most intriguing aspect of these back-to-back showings is how, as an audience member, one would deconstruct and reconstruct the theme of this workshop – “Visualizing ‘Japan’” – using these polar-opposite images. The former paints an image of Japan as oppressive and dismissive towards the homeless population, while the latter follows the pilgrims in a rite of passage of sorts. As representations of Japan, either one would be equally striking whether familiar or unfamiliar with “Japan”, yet in entirely different respects.



The evening ended with a closing commentary by myself, attempting to tie up the many threads of discourse, which would eventually manifest itself as a theoretical analysis of the role of the filmmaker, and how he/she is personified in each visual work, whether intentionally so or otherwise. This theme would be brought even further to the forefront with the remaining screenings and presentations on day 2.

Day Two: Part One

After a relaxed yet lively informal dinner the previous night, the second day brought new audience members and presenters forward to continue our pursuit of visualizing meetings of cultures.

The first such endeavour was Roberto Maxwell’s presentation and film screening of “Dekasegui”, a mixture of interview footage and creative stylings depicting the life of an individual who is not easily identifiable as either Brazilian or Japanese. This spurred the discussion on cultural identification and affiliation, in this case how one can be “Japanese” in Brazil, and “Brazilian” in Japan, which formed the main theme for most of the remainder of the day.

As if to bring highlight the care in planning of the workshop’s program, the next session segued seamlessly on thematically and served as a natural progression for discussion of this topic. It was presented by Tamarah Cohen from Kansai Gaidai, and focused on her extensive project, “We Japanese”, a monumental series of visual interviews on the subject of “international identity”, spanning many volumes. Obviously, showing the films in their entirety would prove impractical, so instead several short clips were shown, to give the audience a sense of the methodology and content.



Here, again, the issue of the filmmaker as participant was brought into question. Ms. Cohen described how in all of these interviews, her intention was to have the frame set up so as to show the subject communicating to the audience: thus, the interviewer sat behind the camera (she describes herself almost as if hiding), and having her eye level as close as possible to that of the lens, with the subject immediately in front. She also explained how, although up until this point all of the material was viewable on the internet, there had been some internal controversy regarding the content matter and unfortunately the conclusion was that the interviews be taken offline. Again, this sparked further debate and food for thought.

Day Two: Part Two

After a brief break, the reins were handed over to An van Dienderen, for her introduction to and Japanese premiere screening of “Patrasche: A Dog of Flanders (Made In Japan)”. The audience’s response to this masterful work of research and filmmaking was that of overwhelming praise, with the theme of two cultures meeting (or perhaps clashing?) and re-interpreting and reconstructing each other, adding a fitting logical progression which was also a summary of our discussions over the weekend.

Kimio Ito (Professor, Kyoto University) provided a closing speech which also included a brief showing of the animated wartime movie “Momotaro Umi no Shinpei (Momotaro, Divine Warrior of the Sea)”, mostly focusing on one interesting concept brought up during the “Patrasche” documentary, which was that of images of children’s death in animation. He demonstrated that the example of this in “Momotaro” is a very abstract one, with the defeated soldiers being represented as falling playing cards.

Lastly, as the discussion threatened to run overtime, it was moved over to a nearby izakaya, or Japanese-style restaurant, to continue our musings and ponderings.

Overall, the workshop proved to be a meaningful opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange and the meeting of diverse concepts and ideas provided the seeds towards new endeavours for all involved.

