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A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary

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I still cannot forget the powerful impression that the French short film *Guernica* [Robert Hessens and Alain Resnais, 1950] made on me when I saw it. The film takes Picasso's mural *Guernica* as its subject matter, but it is essentially different from what we usually call art films. For example, it is not an "appreciation film" that attempts to penetrate into the meaning of the mural by moving the camera all over it, analyzing it into selected parts. Nor is it the kind of "enlightenment film" that attempts to express the feeling and interpretation of the filmmaker by showing the whole tableau, thereby revealing the world of the painting itself using the expressive powers peculiar to the cinema. If the film were one of those types, it would be better to study the painting in a Skira edition instead.¹

Instead, it seems to me that the director of this film, Alan Resnais, is one of the few directors who can consider the contemporary situation [*jokyo*] with a sadistic eye: the film casts aside all lukewarm sentiment and analyzes Picasso's passionate image by tearing it to pieces. The camera cuts the painting into multiple parts, stealing away the meaning of those "fragments" as it sets them off against each other and brings them into violent juxtaposition. Battered images of people from all periods of Picasso's work (for example, the Blue Period) appear and disappear through a masterful use of double exposure, producing an eerie sense of a supernatural world, and overwhelming the viewer with a feeling of peculiar tension.

And yet, what does it mean that in the whole of the film *Guernica* there is not a single full shot of the mural *Guernica*? Surely it is inconvenient to deal with this somewhat horizontal composition in the standard 4:3 aspect ratio. Still, if the goal was to reproduce the tableau as it appeared to the director, a tracking shot that took in the whole painting could create a single shot of the entire image. It follows then

Matsumoto Toshio, "Zen'ei kiroku eigaron" [A theory of avant-garde documentary], in Eizo no hakken: Avangyarudo to dokyumentari (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1963), 47–56; an earlier version was published as "Zen'ei kiroku eiga no hoho ni tsuite" [On the method of avant-garde documentary], in Kiroku eiga (June 1958): 6–11.

1 Skira was a French publisher of high-end art books, founded in 1928, with a specialization in twentieth-century modernism, including the works of Picasso.

that from the very beginning Alan Resnais had never intended to “show” [*miseru*] Picasso’s *Guernica*.

Even though Alain Resnais takes Picasso’s *Guernica* as his direct object [*taisho*], he does not rely on the power of the painting itself as raw material [*sozai*].² The film is always of “the Picasso that Resnais saw” or “Resnais seeing Picasso,” and not simply Picasso himself. That’s why one’s emotional reaction to the film is transformed into “something else” from his emotional reaction to Picasso’s painting itself. Surely that is because “documentariness” [*kirokusei*] in the simple sense is being rejected here. While turning its lens on the external world, the film is made to conform to Resnais’s own interior world. Resnais does not intend to “show” Picasso but to “see” him; what he aims to record is his own vision itself.

Of course, for Resnais cutting the object with the frame line and creating a montage of those individual shots has absolutely nothing to do with the technique of creating an explanatory reproduction of the object, nor with the method of expressing the object in a subjective manner. Recently, great importance has been attached to the functionalist sense of using camera work and montage to emphasize the significance of the object, or assimilating the author’s emotional or subjective response to the object into the depiction of the object itself. But those ideas have been commonplace since Munsterberg and Eisenstein; the task of contemporary art must be to set itself to finding ways to destroy that naive faith in the object, the too-classical understanding of the human [*ningenzō*] that is based on a conciliatory attitude toward the object. It’s clear that the framing and montage that we see in Resnais’s *Guernica* has consciously taken on that task. This is the method of skepticism toward the external world, “what can be seen with the eyes,” and of subjectively [*shutaiteki ni*] pushing forward into the internal world, “what cannot be seen with the eyes.”

The relative equilibrium and stability that is usually maintained between nature and society and the human was first overturned in practice by the generation of artists that grew up in the time of chaos after World War I. Those artists were absolutely unable to put any faith in the existing values and social order, thereby becoming conscious of the confrontation between their subjective internal world and the objective external world. They hoped to resolve the human condition [*ningen jōkyō*], torn to pieces by the mechanisms of contemporary reality, from the perspective of a fundamental transformation of the subject [*shutai*] in relation to the object, thereby creating an awareness of an absolutely new connection between materiality and consciousness, the exterior world and the interior world. For that reason, of course, they had to set themselves as the antithesis to classical realism. That’s why I see such contemporary significance in the post-World War I avant-garde.

However, I am not bringing up Alain Resnais and the problem of a new methodology in order to advocate a return to the line of the 1920s avant-garde. Rather, in order to destroy the formulaic popular realism that is so dominant today and to establish a

2 Matsumoto contrasts raw material or subject matter (*sozai*) with a sense of the subject-object (*taisho*) of representation that is always in relation to the subjectivity (*shutai*) of the filmmaker. Mark Nornes has discussed the complexity of the discourse on *taisho* as both subject and object of representation in *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), esp. 19–27.

new realism, confronting what we should call the interior realism of the 1920s avant-garde is unavoidable. The avant-garde films made in France and Germany after World War I exhibit contrasting tendencies. In Germany, there were expressionist films in which, as in Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*; 1920] for example, a bizarre and mysterious atmosphere is created out of unusual set design and effects and exaggerated action, or there were absolute films such as Eggeling's *Symphonie diagonale* [1924], Richter's *Rhythmus* series [1921–1925], or Ruttmann's *Opus* series [1921–1925] that excluded all literary or explanatory elements and reduced the abstract movements of interiority to purely visual movements. On the other hand, although at first so-called pure films appeared that emphasized visual rhythm under the influence of Moussinac's theory of the Ciné-Poème, represented by Man Ray's *Return to Reason* [*Le retour à la raison*; 1923], Léger's *Ballet mécanique* [Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924], Picabia and Clair's collaboration *Entre'acte* [1924], and so on, soon works such as Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* [*La coquille et le clergyman*; 1928], Buñuel and Dalí's collaboration *Un chien andalou* [1929], and Man Ray's *The Starfish* (*L'étoile de mer*; 1928) appeared that were linked to the surrealist movement in the way they pushed close to the world of the human unconscious, aiming for the absolute liberation of the imagination. The distinctive features of the surrealist method were to reveal the materiality of the object (*objet*) by stripping everyday objects of their meaning and utility, or by the paradoxical linking or juxtaposition (*depaysment*) of essentially different objects; in short, aiming for an abstraction of the world of interiority.

Of course these avant-garde films, as Hanada Kiyoteru would put it, on the one hand take the non-concreteness of the world of concepts, the movement of rational things, and on the other hand the concrete world of the unconscious, the movement of irrational things, and boldly attempt to convert both into the field of vision.³ However, between the change in social conditions since the 1930s and the changes in the subjective consciousness of the artists that confronted it, there is a limit to the extent to which the methods of this historical avant-garde can become the goal of today's avant-garde. The problem is not simply that as a method of capturing the interior world those methods are only one sided, simply one pole in a set of binary oppositions. The real problem is that just as naturalism [*shizenshugi*] is most comfortable clinging naively to the thing-in-itselfness of the exterior world, they [the avant-garde] are most comfortable clinging to the thing-in-itselfness of the interior world. They lack the toughness [*kibishisa*] to bring the interior and the exterior worlds into juxtaposition, by unceasingly engaging their concrete subjectivity.

Of course the image in *Un chien andalou* in which a cloud passes over the moon and a woman's eye is sliced with a razor, or of ants swarming out of the palm of a hand,

3 Matsumoto is probably referring to Hanada Kiyoteru's call for a dialectical synthesis of inner and outer worlds, exemplified by the prewar and postwar avant-gardes, in articles such as "Ringo ni kan suru ichikosatsu" [A consideration of apples] (1950), reprinted in his collection *Abangyaruko geijutsu* [Avant-garde art] (Miraisha, 1954). The essay and others like it were actively debated in the 1950s by writers such as Takeji Teruo ("Seiji no avangyarudo to geijutsu no avangyarudo," *Bijutsu Hihyo* [March 1956]) and Hariu Ichiro ("Viruherumu teru no ringo," *Bijutsu Techo* [April 1956]). See also "Kagami no kuni no fukei" [The landscape of the land of mirrors] and "Jijunendai no 'abangyarudo'" [The avant-garde of the 1920s], in *Hanada Kiyoteru Chosakushu* [Selected works of Hanada Kiyoteru], vol. 3 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1964).

is an attempt at creating a correspondence between the inner and the outer world. But that concretization of a fierce and harsh imaginative detail risks becoming what Dalí calls an “object with symbolic function,” already deeply impregnated with the danger of a fetishism that is no longer connected to a powerful critique of reality and the restoration of the subject [*shutai*]. Buñuel moved in the direction of unifying avant-garde and documentary in making *Land without Bread* [*Las Hurdes*; 1933], excavating the absurdity of the interior (the subjective) through the collision of human beings and material objects, and by means of that putting the absurdity of the exterior (the objective) into relief. That’s quite different from the high realism of *Los olvidados* [1950]. On the other hand, Dalí buried himself in the closed mysteries of a materiality cut off from social reality, thereby serving as a practical demonstration of Marx’s claim that in a commodity production society the fundamental relation between human beings appears as a phantasmal relation to things. In the end Dalí showed a tendency toward fascism and it’s no accident that when he moved to the USA his art rapidly fell into decline.

The point of view from which documentarists today should engage with post-World War I avant-garde films is clear: they should aim at the negation of negation, to sublimate what the documentary has been until now, and what the avant-garde film has been until now. To put it another way, we should grasp the totality of the conflict and the unity between the exterior world and the interior world, aiming for a synthesis of both in the possibilities of a new form of film. And the key to that possibility I discover in Resnais’s *Guernica*.

Although at first glance it seems that Resnais’s *Guernica* rejects showing the painting *Guernica* as it is, it is rather the case that the film refuses to selfishly take the painting simply as material [*sozai*]. By taking the painting *Guernica* as its object [*taisho*]¹—the raging horse, the prostrate corpse, the blinking lantern, the woman bending backward, all of it enveloped in black and white and gray—the film becomes an objective [*sokubutsuteki*] document of Picasso’s actual construction treated as a thing-in-itself. It is only by means of that document that the different and autonomous order of reality called film can for the first time exteriorize, give shape to the interior world, becoming of the same ontological order as the world of the painting *Guernica*. One can surely appreciate that the more the film *Guernica* had simply tried to show the painting *Guernica* in order to explain it, the further it would have been from the world of the painting. To put it another way, even though *Guernica* would surely have been rendered as images, it would have been nothing other than a *Guernica* absent of *Guernica*.

To capture the so-called outer world without leaving anything out, one must capture the inner world without leaving anything out, and to accurately grasp the inner world, one must accurately grasp the outer world; therefore, in order to document the totality of the relation between the two, one must logically process the dialectic of that relation in detail as a truly new method of documentary.

It is necessary to become aware of the territory of the unconscious that forms of realism until now have for the most part ignored and make it the subject [*taisho*] of the film. That which corresponds to the changing, actual, new reality: the complex movements of interiority that form by jutting out of what one has already become aware; something like what Jung called the collective unconscious, the false image in

the heart created by alienation and oppression that is locked up in the subconscious; or what Lefebvre says should be called the biological content of art, spontaneous things informed by instinct and the unconscious including even sex. What's important is to discover what lies between all of those: in summary, the world beneath consciousness, and the external world itself. As a method, that can only mean tearing off the surface of conventional and utilitarian meanings that are applied to the phenomenon by existing forms of consciousness and sensibility, thereby discovering the naked form of the phenomenon according to the specific movement of the bare phenomenon itself, and drawing out the hidden part of the spirit that corresponds to that movement. From the external to the internal, from the internal to the external: only by a fine-grained deepening of this dialectical, reciprocal movement can the reality of the work be guaranteed, can we make possible the subjective [*shutaiteki*] expression of reality. The layering of this kind of analysis and synthesis is the sole guarantee that we can make the concrete thing that is the object [*taisho*] into the concrete thing that is the film. On that point, it is remarkable that the method of the film *Guernica* has a great deal in common with the method of the painting *Guernica*.

Some time ago in the essay "The Subjectivity of the Author" ["Sakka no shutai to iu koto"] I denounced the previous generation of filmmakers, the ones active during and after the war, for having fallen into a deep-rooted corrosion of the self, a situation in which they had forfeited their subjectivity [*shutai soshitsu*].⁴ I discussed the problem of their method of making films in that situation in the following way:

Internal consciousness is a consciousness based on the recognition of the decisive rupture between the exterior world and the subject [*shutai*] in the contemporary period, the fetishization of that rupture, and the collapse of the classical idea of the person. The naturalists must be deeply impressed by the sense that capitalist alienation is above all a process of the materialization [*busshitsuka*] of the interior of the self and the dissolution of the subject [*shutai kaitai*]. When they just rely simply on the exterior, with no self-awareness of their own internal world, they exhaust their imaginative powers and can only shoot the conventional meaning and emotion of things according to atmosphere and superficial appearance, which ends up creating the typical pattern of helpless sensibility. The documentary filmmaker who tries to shoot the subject [*taisho*] with an unemotional eye and so cannot break through to a total grasp of reality by means of documenting their own interiority, their failure to engage in a sharp confrontation with avant-garde art that at first glance seems to have nothing to do with them, not being able to use that as an opportunity for self-negation to aim for a higher-order realism, is based on nothing other than a lack of authorial subjective consciousness.

After publishing this I was subjected to an all-out attack by various filmmakers who said I wasn't making any sense. Perhaps what I was trying to say has been made clearer by what I have written above about Resnais's *Guernica*. If we universalize the problem,

4 In *Nihon kiroku eiga sakka kyokai kaiho* [Newsletter of the Japan Documentary Filmmaker Society] (December 1957).

I have no objection to understanding this problem in a general sense by thinking through the relation set up between the film *Guernica* and the painting *Guernica*.

Today, when we tear off the commonplace causality that attaches to the surface appearance of the reality that surrounds us, the world reveals itself to us as highly surrealistic. Here “circumstances” [*kotogara*] comes to be seen as “situation” [*jokyo*] or “existence” [*sonzai*] and “meaning” comes to be seen as “bare object.”

And in the drama of that bare world there is absolutely no place for things such as simplistic humanism, in the guise of emotion and atmosphere. Socialist realism too, even while seeming like it aims to fundamentally grasp or create a world, is in fact completely naive in the way it falls into putting theme and politics first. The reason for that does not lie in what Ehrenburg calls a lack in ways of representing the “human,” or in what Nikolaeva says about the confusion between theoretical thinking and imagistic thinking.⁵ The failure should be attributed to [the way the previous generation of film-makers] turn their own concepts and feelings into stereotypes, to the lack of a strong subjective consciousness that would produce self-negation by means of actual material reality, and especially to the lack of a methodological consciousness that can grasp and express the world as a totality by means of the conflict and unity of external reality and internal reality. Accordingly, when it comes to the relation between the subject [*shutai*] and the object [*taisho*], by avoiding the change that comes from engaging subjectively with the interior world, socialist realism simply retained the essence of naturalism. The point is, to escape from this alienated situation and recover something truly human it is first necessary to completely reject the vague notion of “humanity” that obstructs the approach to the essence of things. What is most important is to clearly distinguish the subtle yet decisive difference between two things: a methodological and deliberate dissolution of the human [*ningen kaitai*] through an encounter with the object [*objet no hakken*] and the materialist self-dissolution of the human itself, the author him- or herself, as a social phenomenon. As I already pointed out in my critique of Dalí, an uncritical, fetishistic faith in the object is no more than the unconscious self-expression of the dissolved consciousness of an author.

As I have made clear above, the most urgent task facing us as documentary film-makers is to break up from its very foundations the impasse created by the so-called Griersonian phenomenology-above-all method, and to liberate the meaning of the phrase “documentary filmmaker” [*dokyumentarisuto*] from the fetters of naturalism. Of course, the new and contemporary meaning of the word *document* is to record in the mode of a faithful record facts as the actual material reality of facts and at exactly the same time as in confrontation with an interior reality, to document the external and to document the internal, taking the document of the external as the determining instance, in order to create a dialectical unity between the documents of those two worlds. And the key to that possibility I see in the film *Guernica*, merely ten minutes in length, directed by the generally unacclaimed filmmaker Alain Resnais.

5 Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967), Soviet novelist and war correspondent, friend of Picasso. Ehrenburg’s novel *The Thaw* gave its name to the Khrushchev Thaw after Stalin died. Matsumoto was closely involved with struggles over cultural policy on the Japanese Left that in the 1960s gave rise to the New Left (*shin sayoku*). Galina Nikolaeva, Soviet socialist realist author, known for the novel *Harvest* (1950). It is unclear to which writings Matsumoto is referring.

This is surely the ground on which to unify the documentary and the avant-garde. And by that we clearly no longer mean past forms of documentary, or past forms of the avant-garde. Each of them takes the other as its opposite to overcome its one-sidedness, to hint at the possibility of unity in a higher dimension. To indicate that new field of possibility I would like to use the phrase “avant-garde documentary film” [*zen’ei kiroku eiga*] or “neo-documentary.” It is not too much to say that it is only a question of time before films appear that aim at this as-yet-undeveloped world. These are the only ones we can call reform films that respond to the task of the current age, films that will create the new realism. *

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