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Cinema Of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking In The Season Of Image Politics by Yuriko Furuhata (review)

Abstract

The Japanese word eizo is central to an understanding of the significance of the interventions made into the cultural life of the nation by a relatively small grouping of artists and writers working between the 1950s and 1970s. Traditionally used as a phenomenological term in science and philosophy, the character connoted shadow or silhouette, later shifting to signify optical processes. Like the Greek term *tekhne*, creativeness and the tools used to achieve the outcome are relative, nuanced and complex.

Keywords

image, season, filmmaking, politics, garde, cinema, avant, japanese, actuality, furuhata, yuriko, review

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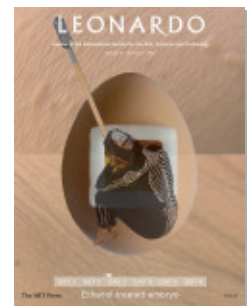
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Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics by Yuriko Furuhashi (review)

Mike Leggett

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permanent hesitation between the impossibility to make meaningful interpretations on one hand, and the necessity to do so on the other). Barnes's journalistic work obeys this allegorical spirit: It criticizes both the closure of determinism and the naiveté of good works, while keeping virtual positions open for commitment and personal interpretation.

The reading of Gertrude Stein follows similar paths. Biers does not foreground the major avant-garde creations of the author, infamously but widely known as the acme of unreadability in modern literature. She focuses instead on the journalistic writings and interviews that went along with an extremely mediated lecture tour in the late 1930s. Already a celebrity, despite (or thanks to) the obscurity of her prose, Stein became a real media celebrity; her portrait, for instance, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Biers underlines the difference between Stein's public figure (a nice old lady who manages to communicate very efficiently with all kinds of audiences) and her utterly hermetic prose (at least according to general standards). She also tries to reconcile both aspects as parts of the same communicative strategy and to show that Stein's public appearance and declarations should be interpreted in a larger, unified framework. What matters here is the discussion on the role of modern mass communication technology and celeb culture, which certain analysts (Walter Lippmann) criticized as a means of manipulation and brainwashing, while others (John Dewey) attempted to foreground its possible democratic virtualities. Although repeated statements during the lecture tour reflected a rugged individualism and strong anti-State and anti-New Deal sentiments, Stein's position toward the mass media was extraordinarily complex. Refusing the ontological prominence of "clarity" in mass media communication, to which she preferred the pragmatic notion of "force," and thus refusing to make any concessions on the density of her prose in her newspaper articles and during her public readings, she developed a style of experimental communication that managed to create a sense of belonging. During her appearances, the public, even if they did not understand what Stein was reading or writing most of the time, could really feel involved, both as individuals and as a community. In this regard, she managed to convert her own idiosyncratic

style as a promise of a virtual community unhindered by the limits of corporate or state mass communication and freed from the dichotomy of star and public.

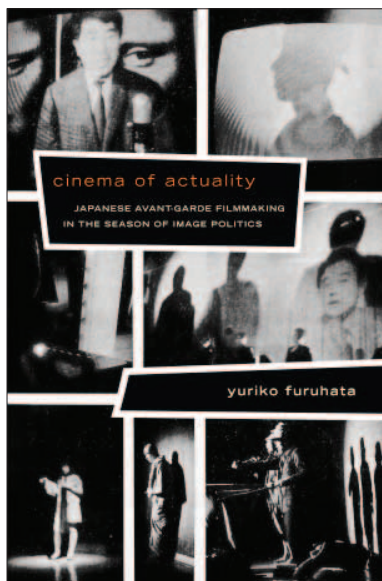
With *Virtual Modernism*, Katherine Biers has written a landmark study that gives an inspirational twist to modernism studies.

CINEMA OF ACTUALITY: JAPANESE AVANT-GARDE FILMMAKING IN THE SEASON OF IMAGE POLITICS

by Yuriko Furuhashi. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, U.S.A., 2013. 280 pp., illus. Trade, paper. ISBN 978-0-8223-5490-1; ISBN 978-0-8223-5504-5.

Reviewed by Mike Leggett, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. Email: <legatt@ozemail.com.au>.

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The Japanese word *eizo* is central to an understanding of the significance of the interventions made into the cultural life of the nation by a relatively small grouping of artists and writers working between the 1950s and 1970s. Traditionally used as a phenomenological term in science and philosophy, the character connoted shadow or silhouette, later shifting to signify optical processes. Like the Greek term *tekhne*, creativeness and the tools used to achieve the outcome are relative, nuanced and complex.

The vitality of Japanese cinema has been ever present within cinephiles' experience; actually attending a screening, though, is usually restricted to

festivals. The historical bibliography is extensive, with a tendency to celebrate the *frissons* of sex and violence, an aspect dealt with in this volume but with a good deal more relevance and care. Studies that grapple with the complexities of cross-cultural analysis are few—Noel Burch's notable work from 30 years ago is referred to here—and the author is well qualified to achieve an excellent addition to the literature, aided I suspect by the distance of time.

The theoretical scaffolding of the period, developed and initiated predominantly by Matsumoto Toshio, enable a realization of the aesthetic and historical issues and the progression of the protagonists, including most notably Oshima Nagisa, towards the development of a body of work distinct from the *samurai* and *yakuza* melodramas more familiar in the West at the time. The chronological development is illusive as the emphasis is on issues—image theory (*eizo ron*, images specifically made using machines); debates that moved away from *riariti* (reality) towards *akuchuariti* (actuality); and the incorporation of journalistic devices and performance events. The term *avant-garde* was applied to the emerging form of cinema, related more closely to documentary film than to art house or artists' moving images. Perhaps this distinction could have been drawn more clearly in the book's title by the use of the term *nouvelle vague*, thus aligning the avant garde movement with the French New Wave of the time, with which it shares many values.

The post-war generations of Japan were well-educated and, unlike the earlier regimented generations, restless for change. From the late 1950s onwards cooperative approaches to creative experiment of all kinds bloomed, unimpeded by the (Western) cult of the individual artist working alone. Likewise, in the streets students agitated and developed alliances with farmers and communities being forced into accepting the inexorable creep of a government "modernization program" of the nation's resources, rallied and defended by corporate media organizations. (I remember local television news channels in the 1960s lapping up the extraordinary images of pitched battles of Japanese students, peasants and police, later repeated briefly by European and American comrades).

In this context of social fluidity, an established genre of *pink film* (erotica), which like international sexploitation movies are made quickly and

cheaply, became the hothouse to which imaginative young men were drawn, (including the infamous right-wing nationalist Mishima Yukio). Wakamatsu Koji's earlier work *remediated* the print and television journalism of the day, directing "our attention to the material gap between the cinematic image and the appropriated journalistic image." within the spectacle of flesh and violence. The group of filmmakers often published discussions of each other's work, linking through to the debates of leftist forces violently agitating against the grip of capitalist authority.

Another group of filmmakers took a different approach in response to events made sensational by the media. Documenting the life and death of a young serial killer, they visited the places throughout Japan from birth where he had lived, worked and committed murder, recording in a series of long takes the appearance of the landscape and the people found there, with a spoken narrative sparsely recounting the formative moments of the boy's existence [1]. A discourse developed known as *fukeiron* (landscape theory) examining whether what in the West would be called a poetic form could engage forcefully with politics. The author pursues this discussion engagingly and at length, with reference to many other thinkers (including European, though not other *avant-garde* and artist filmmakers pursuing this line of research).

A parallel offshoot from *fukeiron* occurs with Wakamatsu and Adachi Masao arriving in Palestine on their way back from presenting at the Cannes Film Festival. Offering solidarity to the Palestinian cause through the production of a film, *The Red Army/PFLP*, a row with their hosts developed over the images of everyday life in the landscape of the refugee camp and the women who ran it. The contradictions of the filmmakers having involvement with the world solidarity movement, and the movements of other filmmakers including Godard and Miéville of the French New Wave, are examined in some detail, leading to the final chapter marking the demise of the radical movements in Japan, those of both the students and the filmmakers who form the core subjects of the study. Reabsorption into the mainstream of the film, television and official contemporary art industries leave a few of the original protagonists to re-emerge with *kojin eiga* (private film). Iimura Takahiko (reviewed in Leonardo Reviews,

<www.leonardo.info/ldr.php>) and others including Matsumoto establish a strand of video art that in the final chapter is replaced in the present era by the actuality of Internet social media and still developing modes of activism.

Note

1. Fortunately, at the time of writing this review, *A.K.A. Serial Killer* was available online in full and with subtitles, unlike most of the other films discussed by the author; a frustrating state of affairs for the full appreciation of both the book and the films.

THE NEXT THING: ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

edited by Pablo Baler. Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, NJ, U.S.A., 2013. 164 pp. Illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-1-61147-451-0.

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doi:10.1162/LEON_r_00876

In his Introduction to *The Next Thing: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, an illustrated anthology of theoretical essays on contemporary experimental art, editor Pablo Baler claims "Nine O'Clock" sounds the knell for an historical paradigm shift in art towards displacement and alienation tantamount to a Lautréamontian *tremor* of intellectual estrangement. To support this contention, he cites tendencies in contemporary art since the 1990s that include attempts to dismantle master narratives; socio-cultural crises of identity; explosive reactions to social injustice; blurred trans-disciplinary boundaries; destabilized ontological contexts resulting from the interpenetration of real and virtual worlds; indeterminate relationships between the past, the present and the future; political activism and tactical intervention; bioethical transgression; and incipient indifference. The collection interrogates not merely the question of "What is Art?" but what it means to be human and what constitutes meaning at all in an increasingly dystopic, anti-aesthetic existence he likens to an alternative "posthuman" biotechnical condition.

Essays explore such subjects as conceptions of futurity; art as socio-political *agent-provocateur*; perception in an age of simulated and reproductive media; art's globalization and pluralism amid assimilated histories, mutated traditions and migration; post-colonial and feminist narratives; performativity, intervention and installation as political



strategies; spatial sensibility, internal audience and subject/object intersections; axonometric perspective, authorship, the impact on art of political crisis and ecological disaster; Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics; post-criticality; ana-materialism, uncertainty, negation and programmable learning; and evolutionary biology (Richard Dawsons), self-replication and artificial intelligence. International authors range from noted visual artists, cultural theorists and novelists to editors, art critics, contemporary philosophers and interdisciplinary professors based in Pakistan, India, the U.K., Israel, Australia and the U.S. with exemplary artworks culled from an intercontinental swathe extending from Southeast Asia to South America.

Widely informed by philosophy and metaphysics, psychoanalytic, cognitive and postmodern theory, i.e. Gilles Deleuze, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, Viktor Shklovsky and Melanie Klein, but also Hegel, Heidegger, Descartes and others, Baler casts his "interrupted reading" in the guise of a fiction for which such literary heralds as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Georges Bataille provide touchstones. Forcefully argued from ethical/ontological premises "deeply rooted in our bodies," Baler considers all meaning to be "directly dependent on our biology," hence predicated upon bioethical responsibility and moral exigency in the determination of future life. He offers Stelarc's freakish transplants, blended biomaterial, disembodied organs, commodified hybrids, cyborgs, prostheses and systems of code as