

The Aesthetics of Filmmaking as Ways of Seeing in Asia: Experimental Documentaries in Japan and Thailand

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Introduction

The tension between reality and construction has always been central to practitioners of documentary filmmaking right from the start. Documentary was first defined in 1929 as the “creative treatment of actuality” by the “father” of the documentary, John Grierson; since then, influential avant-garde filmmakers around the world have offered creative treatments of experience (Grierson 1933).

By 1990, the work of filmmakers from diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world was inextricably bound with self-inscription gained prominence. In these films, subjectivity serves as “the filter through which the Real enters discourse as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge”, (Renov 2004, 176).

Together with this trend, various Western film scholars wrote extensively around the objectivity in documentaries: Bill Nichols (1994) discussed the “blurred boundaries” between fiction and non-fiction in films; Michael Renov (2004) argued for a heightened role and function of subjectivity in contemporary documentary practice; Catherine Russell (1999) broke down inherited genre distinctions, allowing for the consideration of “experimental” films, “ethnographic” films, “documentaries”, and “video art”, within the same critical framework.

For their part, Asian films and filmmakers have been largely absent in such film theories and histories. In Asia, there has not been much academic attention to explore this potent interplay between documentary, visual anthropology, and the avant-garde, which can arguably become a solution to the “crisis of representation” of cultures and the world’s history.

While conducting research in Japan and Thailand in 2011-2012, I came across a number of films and

filmmakers who have made important contributions to both documentary and experimental film histories. They used innovative forms to blur boundaries and challenged the definitions and aesthetics of documentary films as well as addressing social issues.

I am particularly interested in films where an individual subjectivity collides with larger social and political issues; those that relate objective events from a subjective point of view; in ways where reality and fiction negotiate; and where documentary and avant-garde filmmaking converge. These kinds of films can perhaps be called broadly called “experimental documentary” (with the formulation of “critical subjective-ness”).

This paper consists of two sections: (1) my survey of filmmakers who consistently work in the gray areas between documentary and avant-garde filmmaking in Japan and Thailand; and (2) a description of the two experimental non-fiction films that I made with footage I shot of everyday life in Japan and Thailand, respectively.

Findings

JAPAN

Among Asian countries—where until recently documentary filmmaking was largely the domain of central governments—Japan is exceptional for the vigor of its nonfiction film industry. Documentaries came to the fore of film history in Japan as early as in the sixties, with pioneering activities of independent documentarists. While Ogawa Shinsuke and Tsuchimoto Noriaki—the “two figures [that] tower over the landscape of Japanese documentary”—took the “history written in bold” (challenging state and corporate crimes) as their subject matter and fixed their eyes on the “extraordinary”, from the 1970s, we’ve also seen directors who made films about the “ordinary” that are also personal and subjective (YIDFF 2005).



Yamagata International Film Festival (YIDFF) Tokyo Office (2011)



History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess (1970)

Through film organizations in Japan, especially the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF)—the longest running and most distinguished documentary film festival in Asia that takes place every two years since 1989—I have discovered significant filmmakers who work within the “blurred boundaries” of documentary and avant-garde filmmaking.

Imamura Shohei (1926-2006)

Shohei Imamura has been widely recognized as one of the most important directors to emerge during the 1960s from the *Japanese New Wave*, or *Nūberu bāgu* (the Japanese pronunciation of the French term *nouvelle vague*). His documentary and fiction films, which commonly depicted the underside of the Japanese society—criminals, pimps, and pornographers, are considered to have “both an anthropological aspect and an implicit critique of modernity and consumer capitalism” (Harvard Film Archive 2007).

In *A Man Vanishes* (1967), which began as a documentary about the rising number of missing persons in Japan, Imamura ingeniously mixed fiction and documentary and created a great impact rarely achieved in films. While Imamura presented the film as a documentary investigating an actual missing person’s case, he actually hired an actor to play the investigator who interacts with the missing man’s fiancée, thus creating a fascinating mixture of fact and fiction. The filmmaker’s message is clear – objectivity is impossible in films and the relationship between filmmaker and subject will always be fiction.

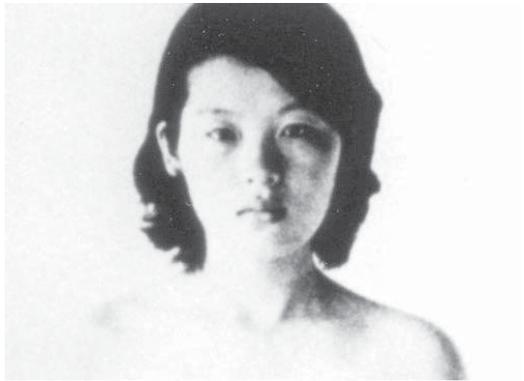
History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess (1970) shows us that history is subjective and is conditional on individual interpretations. Instead of an official history of post-war Japan, the film presented the unique and candid views of the resilient, lower-caste Onboro-san, brilliantly contrasting the bar owner’s story of her life with newsreel footage of key national events from Japan’s surrender at the end of WWII, through the U.S. occupation, to student protests and the Vietnam War.

The fact that the authenticity of Onboro-san and her story is in doubt only helps highlight Imamura’s point that “fiction can be a more potent and truthful way of approaching historical events than documentary”; and suggests that by freeing themselves from the realism and objectivity pretensions of the documentary format, documentary films can actually come closer to the heart and spirit of what they try to portray (Sharp 2001).

Hara Kazuo (born 1945)

Hara Kazuo started to make documentary films from the early 1970s, and for the next four decades, continued to produce radical films that focused on outcasts and those on the margins of postwar Japanese society. His groundbreaking and controversial films usually followed dramatic narratives and characters in a documentary style that is personal and severe.

Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974 (1974)—Hara’s most personal and confessional film—offers an intriguing portrait of a postwar Japanese society that was going through a time of transition with



Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974 (1974)

dramatic social changes. The film for several years followed Kazuo's 26-year-old ex-wife Miyuki Takeda, a radical feminist who relocated from Tokyo to Okinawa. The film shocked Japanese audience at the time as it, in an extremely intimate and matter-of-fact way, confronted such issues as sexual liberation, homosexuality, gender politics and racial discrimination. In one long, raw, and striking shot, Hara showed spread-legged Miyuki squeezing out her mix-race baby onto the floor while shaming her infant for looking like his father, an American GI. By ignoring various cinematic conventions, using jump cuts, flash frames, hand-held camera, and out-of-sync sound, the film in effect aptly created a feeling of dislocation and loss (Runoff 1993).

The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On (1987), a highly original and controversial film, traces the efforts of the one-man wrecking crew Okuzaki Kenzo, an ex-Private of the 36th Engineering Corps, who fought in the West Pacific during World War II, to chronicle war crimes committed by Japanese soldiers in occupied New Guinea. Instead of using historical documentaries' didactic form—such as relying heavily on archival footage and interviews with eyewitnesses and scholars—Hara chose to focus on Okuzaki's "present day activities and the reactions that he provokes in others", thus exploring the living memory of the war, not the past as history (Runoff 1993).

American documentary theorist Bill Nichols—who seeks to distinguish particular traits and conventions of various documentary film styles—identified six different documentary "modes": poetic,

expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative (Nichols 2001).

According to Nichols' conceptual scheme, Hara's films can be considered as belonging to the reflexive, participatory and performative modes. In contrast to many "observational", or "direct cinema" documentaries—which follow rules and techniques that make the subject and audience least aware of the presence of the camera—Hara's characters regularly directly address and interact with the camera and the filmmaker.

Collaborating with the film subjects is also an important strategy for Hara's documentaries—which also include *Goodbye CP* (1972), a raw and disturbing film made in collaboration with a group of individuals afflicted with cerebral palsy; and *A Dedicated Life* (1994), which explores the maddening duality of controversial literature figure Inoue Mitsuharu. Hara's collaborating method with his subjects is comparable to pioneering ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch's *ethno-fictions*, in which, by means of fictional narrative and often improvising, the subjects are encouraged to act their own lives for the camera. Hara states, "I am not the type of director to shoot something just happening [like a demonstration], but rather I like to make something happen and then shoot it" (Runoff 1993).

Yutaka Tsuchiya (born 1966)

Tsuchiya, a video maker and media activist, has been one of the more imaginative examples in Japan since 1990s. Among his various activities to expand the network of media activists in Japan, Tsuchiya has been producing and distributing free shareware videos through his organization *Without Television* and supervised the independent video distribution project *Video Act!*

In The New God (1999), Tsuchiya documented the neo-fascist movement in Japan at the turn of the century. The outspoken anti-imperialist filmmaker gave Amemiya Karin, the female vocalist in the ultra-nationalist noise band The Revolutionary Truth, a video camera that she used to present herself with a video diary method. For Tsuchiya,

“this approach was extremely exciting, as the film left my control and developed by itself” (YIDFF 2011).

As the film progressed, the punk rock political documentary was turned into a love story between the left-wing filmmaker and the right-wing singer, and Amamiya gradually moved away from hard-line nationalism. Her transformation was, however, ambiguous and indecisive—unlike in conventional documentaries, where story development, messages and meanings would be unequivocal and convincing. Ending the film with this ambiguity in the transformation of Amamiya’s politics, however, is important as it succeeded in provoking a sense of cultural void permeating young people in Japan in this contemporary time.



The New God (1999)

Matsue Tetsuaki (born 1977)

Tetsuaki Matsue’s thought-provoking and playful documentaries explore and undermine the clichés and conventions of the documentary and Adult Video genres, while also self-reflexively addressing the uneven power relationship between the director and his subject (SOAS 2010). Touching on the areas of personal and ethnic identity, *Annyong Kimchee* (1999) explored Tetsuaki’s own Korean ancestry, while *Identity* (2004) portrayed non-Japanese performers in the sex film industry.

For Tetsuaki, “documentary is fiction storytelling using reality as its ingredients. When I say story, I don’t mean something like three-act structure, but a certain drama that exists from the clashing

of shots. That’s why editing is very important for me. By juxtaposing this shot with that shot, I can create a story that is different from straight reality. That’s what documentary can do. For example, after the great earthquake this year, many Tokyo documentary filmmakers went to shoot the tsunami and what’s happening in the Northeast and claimed they made films. But documentary is not news reportage. I doubted whether the results of fictionalizing reality could be completed so fast. Cinema cannot be made without fiction” (YIDFF 2011).

What Tetsuaki meant by “fiction” essentially was reflections, layers of meanings, nuances and poetry. Essentially, he argued for a mode of poetic anthropology in documentary films. “Poetic anthropology”, or “anthropological poetry” is a form of ethnography that “challenges the dehumanization that lies in the reductionist tendencies of scientific formalization”, while encouraging “intuitive interpretations” of poetic approaches (Fernandez 1991).

Other Japanese filmmakers and video artists who also worked in between documentary, experimental, and fiction, include **Hiroshi Teshigahara** (1927-2001); **Susumu Hani** (born 1928); **Terayama Shuji** (1935-1983); **Ogawa Shinsuke** (1935-1992); **Tsuchimoto Noriaki** (1928-2008); **Tatsuya Mori** (born 1956); **Hirokazu Koreeda** (born 1962); **Nobuhiro Suwa** (born 1960); **Naomi Kawase** (born 1969); **Terashima Mari** (born 1965); **Meiro Koisumi** (born 1976).

THAILAND

The independent film revolution started in Southeast Asia much later than in Japan – at the beginning of the 21st century with filmmakers like Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Pen-ek Ratanaruang in Thailand, Lav Diaz and Brillante Mendoza in the Philippines, Eric Khoo in Singapore and Yasmin Ahmad in Malaysia. The rise of an independent cinema in Southeast Asia, however, has quickly become one of the most significant developments in World Cinema. These independent films have not only told “stories from the dark underbelly of society” and dealt with “subject matters that are politically taboo in the often rather authoritarian countries of Southeast Asia”, but also showed the ordinary everyday life, and addressed “the anxieties of

the newly emerging middle class” in these countries (Baumgartel 2012, 5). These films—many of which aim to revive traditional story-telling through cinema or develop their own experimental film language—should be assessed not only by their subject matters or their political significance, but also by their aesthetic standing and innovativeness.

Through organizations in Thailand, in particular—the Thai Film Foundation, the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, and Jim Thompson Art Center, I have discovered a number of Thai experimental filmmakers and moving image artists whose works reside at the intersection between documentary and fiction, and have expanded the boundaries of documentary films.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (born 1957)

Araya is Thailand’s most prominent female artist whose work, for the last 25 years, has consistently explored issues of sexuality, identity and death. Araya’s meditative and provocative video works often focus on the idea of communication between different realms—between the living and the dead; the insane and “normal” people; humans and animals; and between East and West.

Although Araya’s work uses global references and media and can be aligned with such feminist video and body art as that of Carolee Schneemann, Tracy Moffatt, Mona Hatoum, Louise Bourgeois, and Joan Jonas, it remains to be rooted in the Thai context, drawing on Thai literature, music, bodies and social context (Fuhrmann 1997).

In *The Two Planets Series* (2008), Araya placed large-scale reproductions of iconic 19-century Western artworks—paintings by Renoir, Manet, and Van Gogh—in villages, markets, and a Buddhist temple in Northern Thailand, where she filmed groups of farmers or working class people discussing the artworks. In one video, a Buddhist monk turned to the Five Precepts of Dharma in trying to explain Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and a Jeff Koons work—which shows the artist surrounded by scantily-dressed women—to an audience of villagers, children and dogs.



The Two Planets Series (2008)

Araya’s video series show the meeting of two different worlds, or contrasting pairs—high art/low culture; the personal/private spheres; urban/rural; rich/poor. These transcultural encounters turned upside down the long-accepted Western art historical meanings, demanding instead more complex, multiple, and context-dependent interpretations of artworks (Reilly 2012).

Apichatpong Weerasethakul (b. 1970)

For the last 10 years, Apichatpong Weerasethakul has been a central figure not only in Thai film, but also Southeast Asian independent cinema. The original and pioneering moving-image artist studied architecture at Khon Kaen University before completing a Master of Fine Arts in filmmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Although influenced by Euro-American experimental traditions—with key influences including Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and the Surrealists—Weerasethakul’s video and film works explore the genres of documentary and fiction in distinctively Thai contexts—for example, he frequently borrows the idioms and stock narratives from Thai television soap operas, comics and radio plays (Ingawanij and Teh 2011).

In his films, which usually focus on the everyday life, Weerasethakul picks up ingredients from reality—recorded telephone conversations, radio drama, street scenes, or sound recordings and footage from his own film shoot—and strings them together in different ways. Weerasethakul refers to documentary as “a reflection of reality according to its maker. It is not the truth (and will never be), but it is a representation of the person behind it” (YIDFF 2003).

In *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), instead of following a conventional narrative structure, Weerasethakul used a surrealist technique called ‘exquisite corpse’—by which each collaborator adds to a composition in sequence by being allowed to see the end of what the previous person contributed. By fusing fiction into documentary, the film was successful in recording the national rural unconsciousness and revealing the country’s collective dream world.



Mysterious Object at Noon (2000)

As Apichatpong states, “It depends on one’s point of view whether the piece of moving image is fact or fiction. If you look at it in a large, perhaps ethnographic, scale, everything is a rehearsal—a documentary of mankind. But if you approach it in a philosophical way, everything is fiction. Every cut, every pan, every frame is a subjective [piece of] make-believe. With this complexity in mind, I prefer to have the film work [itself to provide] the discourse” (Fitch 2011).

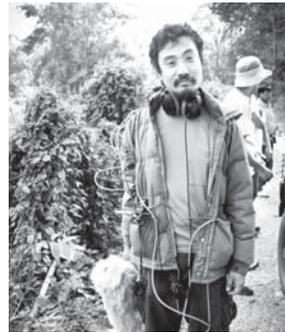
Paisit Phanprucksachat (b. 1969)

Apichatpong described Paisit—who regularly works as a soundman for other filmmakers—as someone who was “made to become the first modern experimental filmmaker in Thailand” who “in his desperation to tell stories, equipped himself with sound recorders, home made microphones, and a still camera”, whose filmic world is “filled with dark and apocalyptic humor” (Limitless Cinema 2011).

Although Paisit presents many of his films—all of which were made with extremely low budgets—in a documentary style, he never narrates them for coherent meanings, but leaves it to viewers to use their own imagination and make sense of the films

themselves. Paisit’s experimental films including *The Cruelty and the Soy-Sauce Man* (2000) and *Tough Creatures Who Burden the Earth* (2004) are typically strung together with shots of mundane urban scenes juxtaposed with those of private spaces, spontaneously recorded footage combined with staged ones—in which he would ask his actors to walk into a real situation and spontaneously respond to it (Lertwiwatwongsa 2012).

In *Manus Chanyong: One Night at the Talaenggaeng Road* (2008), Paisit adapted a classical piece of Thai literature, set in Ayutthaya of 200 years ago, and used images of street scenes, the river, and ruined temples of present-day Ayutthaya to retell a period tale. “It’s not often you come across someone who combines the ability to draw from his rampant unconscious childlike stories in images, and to convey them through a fully formed aesthetics—an artistic vision unto himself” (Lertwiwatwongsa 2009).



Paisit Phanprucksachat

Other Thai filmmakers I also want to mention include **Panu Aree** (b. 1973); **Thunskha Pansittivorakul** (b. 1973); **Taiki Sakpisit** (b. 1975); **Anocha Suwichakornpong** (b. 1976); **Jakrawal Nilthamrong** (b. 1977); **Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit** (b. 1984); and **Chulayarnnon Siriphol** (b. 1986).

DESCRIPTION OF MY WORK IN VIETNAM AND EXPERIMENTAL FILMS IN JAPAN AND THAILAND

A new movement of independent films started in Vietnam in the mid-2000s with the Ford Foundation sponsoring new training programs for both short

fiction and documentary films. Of particular importance, from my point of view, has been the emergence of independent and experimental documentary films in Hanoi for the last several years with the establishment in 2009 of Hanoi DocLab, a center for documentary films and video art supported by the Goethe Institut where I have worked as director and course instructor.



A filmmaking workshop at Hanoi DocLab (2011)

From the very beginning, DocLab's focus has been to train and nurture local creativity and independent, critical thinking. DocLab organizes weekly screenings of experimental documentary films and video art; filmmaking courses and workshops; and a video library accessible to the public. Public interest, especially from young locals, in DocLab screenings and workshops has been phenomenal. Students from the workshops are first confused, but mostly excited by the freedom to be able to experiment for the first time. They are encouraged to cross boundaries between documentary and fiction, narrative and abstract, video and performance.

In my own video works, I have been interested in experimenting with storytelling and narrative; mixing documentary and fiction, with forms, installation, and performance; using found footage from different sources such as classical Vietnamese fictional movies, corporate events, and Youtube – to examine hidden histories, memories, the role of artists in contemporary Vietnam, freedom of expression and censorship.

My experimental documentary *Chronicle of a Tape Recorded Over* (2010) was in fact inspired by Apichatpong Weerasethakul's use of "exquisite corpse" in *Mysterious Object at Noon*. Traveling along Vietnam War's notorious Ho Chi Minh Trail, I asked local villagers to contribute their tales while the camera was observing their present-day life, merging past with present, reality with fiction, in an effort to assemble a piece of collective history, a history told by the people from the bottom up.



Song to the Front from Vietnamese Classics Re-cut Series (2011)
by Nguyen Trinh Thi

Such works, however, have difficulty in immediately creating a new discourse on the local contemporary art scene because they are typically exhibited in underground or private spaces locally, or overseas. They influence only a tiny number of local artists and audience. The educational efforts on creating the movement of independent and experimental documentary filmmakers and local audience who start to appreciate and understand contemporary films and videos are therefore much more important. Through these efforts, a new set of values – independent, non-commercial, subjective—is on the process of being established.

In Japan: *Jo Ha Kyu*, an experimental non-fiction film by Nguyen Trinh Thi (2012)

During the four months in Tokyo from July through October 2011, I shot video on a daily basis in the format of a video diary, which included footage of the everyday life in Tokyo as I observed it: crowds in subway stations; trains coming and going; people sleeping on the train; children playing in the park. Out of these materials, I've made an

experimental film entitled *Jo Ha Kyu*, using the essential concept of the narrative structure of traditional Japanese temporal arts as a starting point.



Jo Ha Kyu (2012)

Likened by Noh creator, Zeami, to a small stream expanding into a river which eventually becomes a waterfall that crashes into a still pond, *jo-ha-kyū* encapsulates the idea, in simplest terms, of a beginning, middle and end. In this experimental film, the concept is loosely interpreted against the subjective experience of the filmmaker being in the contemporary space and time of Tokyo.

I made this work because—like with other works, I like to experiment—with moving images, to see how one can tell stories or express oneself in different ways. In this work, the particular space is Tokyo, and the particular time is the summer of 2011. The city gave me certain impressions and feelings—loneliness and isolation, orderliness and mechanicalness, but there were also other emotions and events that were happening in the background of my personal experience that had little to do with Tokyo. My daughter who was at the time turning 7 was spending the summer months with me in Tokyo. I had the feeling at the time that she was parting with her purest and most innocent period of childhood and was also emotionally moving away from me. I wanted to put all of these into the work—to make it like a time capsule, a recorded memory. In a way, the piece is about the conflict and co-existence of the concrete and abstract worlds, between objective observances and subjective experience, narrative and non-narrative, documentary and fiction.

With *Jo Ha Kyu*, I started to be conscious about building the soundscape for film. During the four months in Tokyo, I recorded different sources of sounds from various locations in city, including everyday life sounds and sounds from music performances. I also used sounds recorded from under the ocean of the Japanese earthquake of 3/11. Sound became a very important though invisible element of my whole experience of the place.

In Thailand: *Lakbon Haeng Chivit* (Life is a Play), work-in-progress, an experimental film by Nguyen Trinh Thi (2012).

Between December 2011 and April 2012, I filmed everyday life in Chiang Mai and Bangkok as I experienced and observed it. Later, I asked several Thai cinephiles to provide me with “memorable” dialogues from Thai cinema, which I intended to use as a source for the sound tracks in my experimental film.

Lakbon Haeng Chivit is the title of an important work of Thai literature by Akat Damkoeng in 1929, written shortly before the 1932 coup. This work focused on class consciousness, discrimination and the virtues of democracy.

I have made these two films with significant influences of the numerous experimental documentary films and filmmakers I discovered in Japan and Thailand.

Conclusions

The encounters and discovery of the many films and filmmakers in Japan and Thailand who work in the “blurred boundaries” of documentary and the avant-garde have given me tremendous inspiration. In the creation of works such as these lays an implicit invitation and a tacit permission—a sense something like “we’ve done this, what can be done next?” And moreover, the permission and invitation seem extended to both author and audience alike. It seems something perhaps closer to a dare even; this incarnation of contemporary filmmakers and viewers are being challenged by these experiments to take the next logical, or illogical, step and there is great potential in that.

Additionally, this area—where documentary and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity meet—deserves much more attention among film scholars interested in experimental and documentary practices, as well as visual anthropologists in Asia. There has been some acknowledgement, which my footnotes allude to, but clearly there is a great need *within* Asia for a vastly expanded theoretical, critical and philosophical base of experience and scholarly writing within this loosely definable genre.

Naturally, what I have presented here excludes quite a bit more than is put down on these pages and there are many more films and filmmakers that might be discussed but in the interest of clarity and succinctness of example are not included here. Furthermore, Asian filmmakers working in the narrative idiom who lean aesthetically on the traditional documentary form are not discussed here. This is another area where some scholarly work exists but much more remains to be done and particularly from within Asia. It is also a genre ripe for further experimentation.

Exploring these subjective, personal, fictional, experimental documentaries of Japan and Thailand has given me great insights into these cultures, societies and histories. As we have come to realize that given cultures and the social reality cannot be understood as encompassing totalities, we should embrace and value the ‘experimental documentary’—a mode of non-fiction that is concerned with the personal or poetic interpretation of history and experience—where cultures are represented from many different and fragmented perspectives.

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