

On "Frame: Media literacy by modern Cinema"

Interview with Daisuke Akasaka by Mr. Daichi Yoshino on Radio Kansai(KBS)'s "Cinema Kinema" program which introduced "Frame: Media literacy by modern Cinema" on April 18, 2020.

– The title is a single word that sums up your critical activities.

This was the first thing that came up when I talked to Kenji Igarashi, who was in charge at Shinwa-sha, the publishing company at the time. However, the subtitle "Media literacy by Modern Cinema" and the content itself are an extension of my text series "Modern Film as Media Criticism" serialized in film magazine NOBODY.

– In the first installment of the series, you dealt with Roberto Rossellini and Robert Bresson, as in the first chapter of this book, "In and Out. When did you first become clearly aware of the "outside" of the frame?

About 12 years ago, when I started teaching at a university, I first thought about the newness of Rossellini and Bresson had. What were they like? As I wrote in Chapter 1, in the case of Rossellini, the characters in the frame (he call it microscope, so the distance and time for observation is important) change in response to something that works from outside the frame. On the other hand, in Bresson's film, the audience has to relay their senses from sight to hearing when the person inside the frame goes out. In both director's films, the relationship between inside and outside of the frame requires the audience to look at the film in a new way. That was the starting point of my thinking.

– I think that the methods used by both artists more than half a century ago are still contemporary enough. However, I have the impression that the term "modern film" is not as widely used as "modern" music or art. One of the reasons may be that the definition is vague. In this book, you also cover classic films. What is it that defines "modern cinema"?

As for Rossellini and Bresson, they started making films during World War II, and their style became definitive after the war. I think there is a debate as to whether we can call their works "modern films" or not. One of the criteria for calling a film "modern" is that it must have elements that are self-critical and self-referential. As I mentioned earlier, this is because it requires a change in the viewer's gaze. This has had a huge impact on later generations, from the Nouvelle Vague and Post Nouvelle Vague to the present. If we think about the beginning of this, we still end up with Rossellini and Bresson. In this book, I set them up as the starting point of modern cinema in this sense. Of course, there are also filmmakers who have influenced Rossellini and Bresson. For example, in Chapter 2, "Whereabouts of the Frame of the Real," I go back in the history of cinema to Jean Renoir and

Erich von Stroheim. (In the same way, although not mentioned in this book, in NOBODY No. 46, I wrote about Yasujiro Ozu's real time in "There was a Father" (1942) and his leap montage in "Late Spring" (1949), as a precursor to contemporary experimental filmmakers such as Jean-Claude Rousseau, Klaus Wiborny, and Gustavo Fontan.) When we talk about a film, we need to mention the films who influenced it, rather than setting down a certain artist and going straight ahead. This book shows the starting point of modern cinema, but also goes back before that. It moves forward while going back. I thought I needed a way to do that.

-After the second chapter, the argument develops more broadly. In the chapter on Renoir and realism, you wrote "the production of films that document and expose the limitations of the materials and techniques used at the time of production" and explains that the exposure of these limitations is "the realism that film can achieve" and "what gives the audience historical thinking. In the following chapters, you wrote about modern cinema, sometimes going beyond the issue of the frame. The reason for the demand for such self-critical films is the "media criticism" mentioned in the book. The biggest target of such criticism is television, but even when we leave our homes, video is everywhere, on street monitors and in the screens of our personal smartphones. The keynote of this book is also what modern cinema can achieve in this age where images have become a natural part of our daily lives. This is also something that you have been advocating for many years.

In today's situation, images as "nature" are not just there doing nothing, but they are almost always transmitting some kind of information. Image is functioning to transmit information and, if possible, to move people with it. You could call it "manipulation". Most of them are advertising or talking about something, and they intend to be transparent about the medium in which they are talking. On the other hand, modern films make themselves exposure. In other words, modern films make themselves self-referential through sound and images, making them "unnatural". By doing so, they makes the viewer think, "Hey, that's weird". and make the viewer realize that it is not natural. By showing that it is made with an intention, it draws attention to it.

-The methods used by modern filmmakers to make us think "this is weird" are elaborately explained. One random selection is Straub-Huillet's Not reconciled (1963). The film is based on a novel by Heinrich Böll, but it is boldly adapted and the editing does not tell the story smoothly. The film is uncomfortable when compared to the original book.

You have just mentioned Chapter 6, "From 'Muriel (1962) to 'Not Reconciled'. As mentioned in the text, it was Jean-Luc Godard who said, "You should look at these two films in comparison". That was sort of a statement about structure, but in this chapter, I rather wrote positively about Alain Renais, who stays within the frame. Time is passing, but you can't see it in Muriel. However, since time has passed, there is a sense that time has jumped, while Not

Reconciled makes it visible. When I was describing the two films, I also wrote that you can move from *Muriel* to *Not Reconciled* but not the other way around. While *Renaissance* is trying to erase the function of the film, *Straub-Huillet* is trying to expose the function of the film itself. The difference between the two cannot be shown in reverse order, and this can be interpreted as one of the decisive points in the transition from classic to modern cinema.

In this book, I praised *Nouvelle Vague* directors such as Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer, who were influenced by Rossellini, and post-*Nouvelle Vague* directors including *Straub-Huillet*, who were influenced by Bresson, while I treated Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, and *Renaissance*, who appeared right after Rossellini and Bresson, quite critically as directors who manipulated the gaze. Even if Bergman, for example, had a considerable influence on the *Nouvelle Vague* and their successors Philippe Garrel and Jacques Doillon, as well as John Cassavetes and Robert Altman in the United States. In this sense, they are indispensable filmmakers in the history of cinema, but their influence may have been a "necessary evil". However, this is not to say that we should not watch Bergman, Antonioni, and *Renaissance* but it is based on the intention that we should. Because if you don't look and recognize them, you will be manipulated even by their degrading, copy-like images.

-You criticized Bergman for erasure of off-screen space, and the fact that he filmed like a live broadcast. In contrast, in Chapter 5, "From 'historical film' to the Theater=Cinema", there is a quote from Rivette about *La Religieuse* (1966), in which he says that the film is "deliberately acting out a play". Like his predecessor Rossellini, there is an awareness of the need to expose the function of the dramatic film (i.e. the documentary of the performance in front of the camera). It is such a "Theater=Cinema" and the frame of time that will be questioned in this chapter.

The "Theater=Cinema" constructs scenes in the form of "real time". I call it "one scene = one act," and this is the method used by Rossellini, Rivette, *Straub*, *Oliveira*, etc. (Rivette, though not mentioned in this book, has already constructed the real time that *Stroheim* did, in black and white silent film *Le Quadrille* in 1950). When Alfred Hitchcock made *Rope* (1948), he tried to show one scene = one cut by moving people in and out of the film without breaking the cut with a heavy camera loaded with 35 mm film. When we look back and see that now, we can realize that it was documenting the "limits" of cinematography at the time. There was value in that, but the digital and lightweight cameras has made it possible to shoot for long periods of time, and it has become something that anyone can do easily. It is just a boring set-up documentary.

One-Scene = One-Act is different from that. Carl Th. Dreyer and John Ford in their later years insisted on recreating a one-act play as if it were being performed in front of their eyes, by severe connecting shots from appropriate distances and angles, and still in real time. The result is "real time as fiction" that has been created and reconstructed. This is a dimension unique to film and video works, and a way of capturing time that is different from just

a staged film and video.

– It is an inherently unnatural time. In response to this, the part of Manoel de Oliveira's words of "theater=cinema" and politics is also very interesting. In this book, Steven Spielberg is also a target of criticism.

I think Spielberg is an excellent filmmaker. On the other hand, I have to conclude that he is very problematic. For example, the reason is that in the chase scene, he always put the chaser and the pursued in one frame. Whereas the preceding American films showed the chaser and the pursued separately, Spielberg constantly revealed the distance between them. At the same time, this may have taken away the viewer's imagination. That's what I focused on.

–By putting the movement of the chase in the same frame, the distance between the two is made clear, and at the same time, the audience does not have to imagine it. A comparison to this is Raoul Walsh's *The Background of danger* (1943). While analyzing the shots in detail, the distance of Walsh's chase and the speed with which the audience cannot "catch up" is said to be outside the frame, or imagination.

I was not sure whether to include Walsh in this book, which is about contemporary cinema, since it discusses a certain part of the history of classical cinema. However, as I mentioned earlier, I took him as an artist who made images that seem to be far ahead of the modern world and that would no longer be possible to make today. In Chapter 4, "The Imagination is Gone," I wrote about the "speed" and "distance" of classic American cinema, but after Orson Welles, Robert Aldrich, and Sam Peckinpah, the advances in visual technology in contemporary U.S. have now erased the imagination of distance.

– One of the negative effects of technology on cinema and audiences is resolution. And in the context of "we can't shoot anymore," I'm also dealing with Japanese cinema from a time when the studios and their systems were no longer functional.

There was a time when I was not sure whether to include Japanese cinema. But then I realized that I should include it. I thought it was necessary to make people aware that the films being made today are clearly different from the films made in the days of the studios.

– What is interesting about Chapter 8, "From Darkness to the Emerging Body," is that it also deals with television dramas, including *Silver Mask* (1971) because of the "darkness of the screen = difficulty in seeing," which is impossible in today's TV.

There are some TV images that were notorious at the time they were aired, but were later understood. In order for them to be reevaluated, I think they should be screened as films – although this may not be the right way to put it. I took up "Silver Mask" because I thought that it would be a film that would be re-evaluated

and examined by showing it in theaters as a work of Akio Jissoji. I don't praise Jissoji's films, but I think this one can be rated in terms of showing the limitations of television in the 1970s. Of course, so are the TV dramas Shin Zatoichi (1979) and Inspector K (1980) starring Shintaro Katsu, who is also a wonderful filmmaker.

– The limitations of various aspects of the work are questioned. Counting in the index at the end of the book, the most frequently mentioned director is Godard. Godard is mentioned favorably, you praise his modernity but also pointing out his limitations.

Around the time of Nouvelle Vague (1990), ECM began to participate in the production of Godard's films, and ECM music began to be used. I am critical of the fact that since then the sound of Godard's works has lost the noisiness that had been present until then, for example, in documenting the technical limitations of sound cutting and connecting surfaces.

–I was also struck by the point that he has become a "director to be read" by the strings of quotations. This is a book that does not privilege directors in that respect, but the analysis of Godard's many works is very readable. To mention one film that is personally dear to my heart, the analysis of slow motion in *Sauve qui peut / la vie* (1980) made me feel good as I read it, "This is what happens when you put it into words".

Thank you for that. That's another part of the contrast with Walsh that I mentioned earlier. Also, when I was thinking about Godard's scenes that were shot and edited from a 90-degree angle, Yasujiro Ozu came to mind. Of course Godard and Ozu had different eras and shooting styles. Ozu, who shot his films in studios, had everything in place, including a generous budget and staff. Godard was no longer the case, but when I thought about what was there, I thought that this combination was possible.

–I think the development from Ozu to Teiichi Hori's films is one of the highlights of the book.

I want to position it as an endpoint of "traditional Japanese cinema". I think that's what I had in mind when I wrote the book. Hori's work has yet to be seen, and I hope it will continue to be talked about in the future, but he passed away before that situation was ready. I'm angry about that. He was important just by being there. Of course, I think this because he was my friend and we talked about many things, but I think he would have been the best reader of this book. I feel that way too. I think he was trying to embody legitimate Japanese cinema in a low-budget film, or to put it another way, in a film that he made by himself. After studying in France during his college years, he worked as an assistant director in the field of pink films. While making films that embraced the political aspects of Japanese cinema, he was also looking ahead to the future, and he passed away when it was time for him to move on. It may be too early to place him in that position. But I wanted to place him in the history of Japanese cinema with respect. The

"Tenryu-ku" series of documentaries is his personal attempt to apply what Japanese cinema has cultivated to his personal work. I also meant that there would be no one who could do this in the future.

-The phrase "the only and last modern film that embodies personal work" in reference to Tenryu-ku is also impressive. In the following chapter, "Against Media Images," you carefully follow the films of Egypt, Spain, Brazil, Chile, and other countries that tend to be regarded as marginal countries in Japan. Because many of these films are not distributed or released in Japan.

This may sound a bit problematic, but I believe that those involved in the distribution and screening of these films have had their eyes and ears manipulated, and this ignorance has led to a situation where people have lost their imagination about those countries. This is a very dangerous situation that deprives audiences and viewers of the ability to resist manipulation through the media. In addition, as I point out in this book, the context of international film festivals has become more TV-like, which has a negative impact.

- The relationship between international film festivals and television and the provision of capital was pointed out in an interview I gave you in 2013.

I think what they are doing it for is to broadcast on TV. The importance of what I call "modern cinema" in this book is a criticism of television, which is symbolized by textual information, and as an extension of this criticism, there is also a criticism of the film festival system, which is becoming more like television.

-I feel that the current state of our society, both in Japan and abroad, is the result of the pursuit of television-like ease of understanding and information transmission by both creators and receivers.

I think this is really evident in the current situation. I started thinking about this around 1991, when the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union ended and the Soviet Union collapsed. After the Gulf War, television, which had not been overt until then, rapidly began to play the role of propaganda through images. At the time of World War II, the role was played by films as "media images". It was replaced by television, and we got rid of it. When we think about what films can do now that they have been discarded, I think that they have played an important role in criticizing them. Godard described the fallen cinema as "ex-idol". Although it has fallen as a major medium and entertainment, what only that film can do is criticize the media. The self-criticism and the "self-inflicted wounds" of modern cinema expose their own functions are for this purpose. In this book, I argue that the audiences who simply accepted the images were alienated or called the films "difficult and boring," but in fact it was the audiences who were wrong. In this respect, it is a book that advocates "be against war," and it may also be taken as a book that defies the media that manipulates people.

– With regard to the war, you also refer to Ozu's works from the perspective of "repentance".

Ozu was capable of making perfect films, but his films have cracks in them that make people think, "That's weird and unnatural". The reason for this was not clear to viewers during his lifetime. In fact, the cruelty of Ozu's films is that an unaware audience can go through them. But now that I think about it, the reason he made such films was to prevent the film from becoming a tool of the war in which he himself participated.

– A publication event was held at Kinokoya in Tokyo in February last year. In an email I received later from an acquaintance who visited the event, he wrote, "Mr. Akasaka is an anti-war curator," and I was convinced he was right (laugh).

(laugh) For example he said to me that Straub=Huillet didn't adjust the sound when they connected the shots but today's young people who are used to watching YouTubers' videos don't feel the impact of that anymore (laugh). But the issue is not about that, it's about what the limits of the times are, and I answered, "If YouTubers don't find their own limits, their videos will be forgotten". That's why it's probably more hard situation for the people who are making the images now.

– With the Covid-19 pandemic, we now have more opportunities to see the works of the directors featured in this book online. You have been actively tweeting about them.

Many directors and production companies in countries where people were forced to stay at home have made their works available online through YouTube and other websites. Many of the artists featured in this book have also released new works in this way, so the timing was just right. But this situation is so unique that I don't know how long I'll be able to access it.

– Your argument has been consistent for a long time. However, this book can be read as a timely book that reflects this situation.

It was a challenge to write a book that rethinks the ongoing image in the shortest possible time, given the situation at the time of writing. Ten years ago, I hadn't thought of making a book, because with print, you can't jump from one text to another, or from one video to another, like you can on the Internet, and you're trapped there. I felt that was inconvenient. It also had a little to do with the fact that I had submitted quite a few projects to publishers before that, but they all got turned down, and I was in a mood to say I give up (laugh). Since then, I've been screening and introducing foreign films for about 20 years, and when I thought, "Well, I should publish a book," I consulted with Mr. Igarashi, and it was very fortunate that it took shape like this.

-I was very fortunate that it turned out the way it did. - And the writing style is unique. When I read through the book, I feel as if I'm misreading something, missing the point.

If that's how you read it, I feel like I did rather well as a writer. I initially envisioned a writing style in which I would describe one image while simultaneously describing another, or multiple images. I received an impression from a reader that it was like Godard's history of cinema. That's a bit fearsome (laugh), but to be a bit more fearsome, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* is written in a way that evokes multiple images and poems rather than a single sentence, which also causes a kind of difficulty in reading. As you can imagine, I quickly abandoned that high hope, thinking that I couldn't publish it as a film book if I went that far (laugh). But I did have a big plan at the beginning to write about one thing, and also to compose sentences referring to multiple things.

-It may be a coincidence, but the title of *Finnegan's Wake* is mentioned in the introduction. To digress a bit, while reading this book, I kept thinking, "This writing style sounds like something," and then one day I realized, "It sounds like James Blood Ulmer". It's almost a fantasy (laugh). If you go back, You once tweeted a video of his concert.

Ulmer was a member of Ornette Coleman's band. I like both of them and listen to them often, but I was impressed by Ornette's statement that he "equates the elements that make up his music as equals. There is an anecdote in which he called his music "harmolodics" and said, "A single note on a staff can be played in any key," to which an interviewer objected, "Isn't that dissonance? But I think Ornette was asking to change the listener's ear. That's how I saw it. I think it is an important thought to question the "unnaturalness" of chords that are thought to be "natural. Another book I enjoyed reading once upon a time was "Forces In Motion" by composer/free jazz player Anthony Braxton and critic Graham Lock. This is a wonderful book consisting of music history and travelogues of Braxton's quartet. It's also a book of Afro-American history, as well as musings on various kinds of music, not just jazz. My memory of that wonderful book may have influenced it just a little. Maybe not (laugh).

- It's a book that can be read in many different ways, but can it also be read like listening to free jazz? It is a book that can be read in a variety of ways.

Books on the history of cinema, as I mentioned earlier, have the aspect that film has already fallen, and they are seen as a source of nostalgia for the past (at least in Japan). Such books are said to be for a limited audience, but this book was not written with that in mind. If we don't think that there are important films that still need to be reevaluated, we will die as puppets in the prison of the visual media that only provides text and information. This sense of crisis was also a major motivation for my writing. The world is now trapped in a frame of virus, and this situation also

shows that there are forces that constantly try to trap people and forces that try to get them out of it. In this sense, I believe that frames are not limited to cinema, TV screens, or computer monitors.

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