

A Filmmaker's Filmmaker: Hara Kazuo in His Own Words

***Camera Obtrusa: The Action Documentaries of Hara Kazuo***

Originally Published in Japan 1987, English Translation 2009

By Hara Kazuo

By Cynthia Close, published in Documentary magazine, 2011

Who is Hara Kazuo? For those of you who cannot answer that question, let me direct you to the first full-length English translation of Kazuo's writings on his film process, his life and his philosophy, *Camera Obtrusa*. We can thank Pat Noonan and Takuo Yasuda for taking on the challenge of bringing the words of this award-winning documentary filmmaker to a much wider audience. I was also pleased to see that this project was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, among others.

I was astounded that I had never heard of this filmmaker, whom Michael Moore has acknowledged as his "Japanese soul brother." Moore credits his discovery of Hara as his earliest inspiration. Upon watching what is perhaps Kazuo's most famous film, *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (1987), Moore felt he had been given permission to make *Roger & Me* the way he wanted to make it. Other quotes of praise on the book jacket from the likes of Errol Morris seem to suggest that this is a "filmmaker's filmmaker," and might explain to some extent why Kazuo is not more widely known.

Since I couldn't possibly review a book written by a filmmaker whose work I had never seen, I searched Netflix for films by Hara Kazuo and immediately moved *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* and *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974* to the top of my queue. I had read about a third of the book when the DVDs arrived and I could hardly wait to watch them. There was a thrill of discovery of something exotic and exciting that had been planted by the seeds of Hara's own words. While this is supposed to be a book review, not a film review, it is obvious that the two are inextricably linked, especially since 300 of the book's 371 pages are dedicated to explicating the process behind the making of his four best known films, starting with *Goodbye CP*, followed by *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974*, *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (recognized as the most important and influential documentary ever made in Japan) and *A Dedicated Life*.

Shot in black and white, with an almost feverish sense of "being there," the films were a revelation. As Kazuo and his camera delved deeper, prying open relationships, I didn't know whether I should be watching such intimacy—but I couldn't look away. Like a voyeur, I was hooked and fascinated, and by the end of the films, I felt as though I had actually met someone, and that someone was Hara Kazuo.

Hara's written words ring as true as the voices in his films. There is a feeling of presence in both the films and the book as Hara tells us, "The past is useless," and as a filmmaker he must "move forward from an action in the present." I can see why Michael Moore found these films inspirational. There are similarities in Moore's and Hara's approaches, evidenced by a shared tendency to interfere with the reality they were filming. Hara tells us, "Whatever happens, keep the cameras rolling," but it

seems that Moore has come to rely on his camera as a weapon; Hara, on the other hand, is all about “relationships,” and his camera is a vehicle for self-discovery—both ours and his.

In the beginning of the book, Hara tells us the facts of his early life: He was born in 1945, and he doesn’t know his father, other than he was a “patron” of his mother when she worked as a young woman in a cabaret in Osaka. The war years in Japan were pretty horrific, and while Hara’s family life was complicated (his mother was married three times) and fraught with extreme poverty, “They didn’t starve.” He also writes movingly about his sense of home; for him it “was never an actual dwelling. It was more like an idea—and in my case, it was practically non-existent. Issues related to a home—being attached to it, for example, or wanting to destroy it—were somehow foreign to me.”

He writes about his spotty educational background, his first exposure to the movies and his realization, after graduating from high school, that he wanted to be a photojournalist. As he tries to solve the problems of poverty while fulfilling his assignments as a photojournalism student, he stumbles into the world of the mentally and physically disabled and becomes absorbed into their lives by taking pictures. It was during the mid-1960s, as worldwide political, social and cultural unrest was fomenting, and protest movements were only beginning to be formed, primarily by intellectuals, a group that did not include Hara. As he writes, with modesty, “I had come to Tokyo knowing really nothing about the world, and, bit by bit, I was learning how society functioned, how people lived their lives.”

Even as Hara’s films expose aspects of culture and society, he keeps coming back to the individual. “I don’t so much want to expose specific issues as I do the drama that comes from engagement—which, to my way of thinking, is what drama, in fact, is...I meet someone, I’m fascinated with them and I want to film them.” As he reflects on his life and work, he hints at where he might be headed: “I’d like to try filming an organization...for example, a religious organization or an organized crime group. While depicting the ‘individuals’ within such organizations, I’d like to deal with their internal workings, their group dynamics. However, I’ve never encountered a group I’ve wanted to film, so I haven’t yet made a film about a group, though I’d like to someday.”

Thanks to this translation of *Camera Obtrusa*, I will be one of those looking forward to seeing the next film—perhaps one about an organization—made by Hara Kazuo.

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