

Where is cinéma going? Stephen Sarrazin¹

Iconography of Yasujiro Ozu — National Film Center (Tokyo, Japan), December 12th to March 30th, 2014.

Steve McQueen "Ashes" — Espace Louis Vuitton (Tokyo, Japan), April 26th to August 17th, 2014.

Reading Cinema, Finding Words: Art after Marcel Broodthaers — The National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo, Japan), April 22nd to June 1st, 2014.

Spring 2014 in Tokyo has offered three distinct approaches to the exhibition of what is 'filmic' in contemporary moving image culture: an archive show devoted to a master filmmaker, a new installation by a recently Oscar-winning director, and a theme show focusing on the camera apparatus in contemporary art.

Things falling where they may

Within a framework of events dedicated to the one hundred and tenth anniversary of Yasujiro Ozu in Japan, which is to say relatively little, this exhibition, in spite of its modest scale, succeeds in raising questions (as to who he was as an artist) that will accompany the spectator upon exiting the displays. They will linger because the exhibition's purpose is not to answer them, for it sides very much with Ozu, the eternally absent commentator of his own films which have been dissected every which way over the last four decades.

Meticulously conceived by the National Film Center's careful Hidenori Okada, this collection of objects, drawings and storyboards, bindings and letters, photographs, all signed by Ozu, confirms his taste for popular aesthetics, an amateur of *kabuki* rather than of *noh*, a maker, as he said himself, of tofu rather than richer dishes.

These archives from the Film Center, beyond inducing a desire to covet, establish the two-sided gaze of this film master: firstly, if Ozu has always made films about the middle class, the working class, it's because he is one of them. The letters between his screenwriter Noda and himself, the photographs of both of them, drunk, joyous, sleeping, point to an economy, a simplicity of what qualifies as pleasure, explored nonetheless with great abandon.

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Image 1: Ozu exhibition | © National Film Center, Tokyo 2014

Secondly, this pleasure finds shape in his art of directing, and a key merit of this exhibition is its ability to remind us of Ozu's circle of collaborators, from Noda to all the performers who make up his company of actors to his director of photography. Likewise, it sheds light on how Ozu is perceived abroad, and how, in spite of these forty years of existing as a name, those of his collaborators remain on the fringes of Memory.

The iconography at play here defies the singular myth of Ozu, a director trapped by critics and theoreticians whose aims were, and continue to be, about legitimizing their 'awareness' of the analytical clichés that have burdened his films (a particular French critical trait, as if to state were to dispel). It also steers clear of the imminently inane remarks of Shigehiko Hasumi, who painted a portrait of Ozu as the least Japanese of directors from that formidable era. On the contrary, it gracefully underscores how Japanese his work was, and bids us to do away with one enduring cliché, its 'excess of Japaneseness' lamented by Shochiku, who used this as a pretext to keep his films away from international festivals. This blight was of Shochiku's own making, the films themselves were not hurrying to meet the world. With time, the world managed to catch up to Ozu. And so this exhibit brings tangibility to what is contained within his films, it

materializes the ethereal and provides a sense of weighted physicality.

More notably, it sheds lights on a unique member of Ozu's entourage, Tatsuo Hamada, his art director, the person responsible for crafting the unique interiors of his representations of Tokyo, Kyoto, and more importantly, Kamakura. Hamada would conceive the harmony of tones with Ozu (the latter composed each shot with precise details, for instance setting bottles, cups, glasses and plates on the tables). In a wonderful archive interview closing the exhibition, Hamada explains how each interior had to give the performers a sense of having already been lived in; the objects ready to be picked up, rustled clothing waiting to be put away, everything had to be there before performers entered the frame. When characters return home, drunk (as in Tokyo Story, Autumn Afternoon), such as those played by Chishu Ryu and his old comrades from the army days, they remove their clothes, letting their jackets drop, every mark is there. They are the final touches to his canvas.

They carry the unexpected surprise of aroma of life in Japan. The photographs taken of interiors from Ozu's most celebrated films have a scent of sake, of stale tobacco on cloth, of grilled fish, a breeze filtered through the cherry trees, of lovely actresses perspiring in Tokyo's Summer.

In 1963, Henri Langlois showed a selection of Ozu films at the Cinémathèque Française. It is said that twenty fortunate spectators attended the screenings. France would wait until the end of the seventies before truly discovering his work. Currently, in April and May 2014, the Cinémathèque is holding an Ozu retrospective, accompanied by a single conference (a book release, some dvd's add to the 'celebration'). The National Film Center's elegantly intimate exhibition deserves to travel outside Japan, on a similar scale; a catalogue would be a welcomed addition. With any luck, it will do just that, before the one hundred and twentieth anniversary comes around, by which time Ozu might actually return to Japan.

Tokyo, April 2014

Tell it to Brad

Steve McQueen's work is very much about one thing at a time. His previous film/video installations stressed that the spectator would be looking at one action, boxing, a house falling on the artist, as it did with Buster Keaton, or a decade ago, Charlotte Rampling's eye, and a more recently, a tree whose branches weighed heavy with symbolism. And that one thing that is set before us are the shackles from which to be delivered. His feature films' titles went with the program as well, *Hunger*, *Shame*, *Slave*. The same sense of rigor and formal purpose has made his work exacting. Whether at close range, as in the pieces with Tricky and Rampling, or using distance and a wider

frame, McQueen elicits a number of feelings and questions, warmth rarely being one of them. And yet in both 12 Years A Slave and Ashes, his new film installation premiered at the Espace Vuitton in Tokyo, his palette, by virtue of location, becomes considerably warmer. Both works trace a narrative of getting back, and staying the course. Both recent works share this blocked vision Raymond Bellour refers to (2012), one single screen in the dark, conveying an uninterrupted quality of entrapment.

Oddly, the essay that accompanies *Ashes* at Espace Vuitton (Fisher 2014) encloses McQueen's work within a theoretical framework made up of Susan Sontag, Jean-Luc Nancy, Judith Butler, etc. while *Ashes* appear to fight against this. It is work shot in super 8 in the West Indies, where his parents came from, showing a lithe smiling young man on a boat, on a bright sunny day, blue sea around him, trying to maintain his balance while making his way back.

Back to where remains unresolved, a quality that defines much of McQueen's work, the unknowing 'what comes next'.

http://www.espacelouisvuittontokyo.com/en/#artwork http://news.artnet.com/in-brief/steve-mcqueen-returns-to-artmaking-11576

A Bigger Screen

For nearly three decades, art institutions in Japan have examined new means of image making and exhibiting. This was set in motion at a time when the issue of 'film/cinema' installations had not yet been put forward. Video, analogue then digital, and film, with their respective camera apparatus, rarely co-existed within the confines of a singular exhibition. Even when media artists explored the mythologies of cinema, from aura to narrative, it was done through electronic means. Others, over years, dispensed with the 'movie' reference, endeavouring to construct, in the modernist tradition, a medium-based aesthetic. The monitor was canvas and surface. However, the current dissemination of projections, the experience of the projection, whether from a film or video projector, warranted an expanded debate.

Exhibitions addressing changes in moving images and their mediums go back twenty-five years, with the Pompidou Center's seminal *Passages de l'Image* (1990), a brain child of Raymond Bellour. Japanese institutions followed suit, notably NTT's ICC Center. But it took Japan longer to consider the next paradigm, when the projection itself became the defining principle, rather than the technology behind it. By the late nineties, critic and curator Jean-Christophe Royoux began talking of a 'cinema of exhibition', in reference to the emergence of a new generation of multidisciplinary artists moving beyond the monitor. In France, this would elicit a par-

ticular resonance among art, media, and film critics, as they sought to locate how and when the shift occurred. Bellour, who did not go unchallenged, again picked up the mantle, arguing that the most interesting experiments in cinema were now taking place within the contemporary art world².

Reading Cinema, Finding Words: Art after Marcel Broodthaers is 'attuned' to this, the majority of works are projections, but the unifying element between photography, film and video works assembled is the camera, and how it is used by artists to establish a relationship with cinema. Which makes the project conceptually fragile.

Galleries and museums in Japan had already held major exhibitions by Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Doug Aitken, Bill Viola, without expressing such concerns, at a time when film culture itself began to lose sway in Tokyo's cultural landscape. To its credit, *Reading Cinema* hurries to make up for lost time, to correct a curatorial stance, yet appears more preoccupied with headings, such as 'reading the archive', 'fiction and reality', 'still and moving image', than with the contents operating in each of the artists' works.

And because 'cinema' is in the foreground, the exhibition is staged as a series of small theaters, each with its own heading, with Marcel Broodthaers' 8mm films and projectors located in what would be the lobby of this multiplex. The spectator making his way from screening to screening encounters films, videos, photographs by Pierre Huyghe, Isaac Julien, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Miwa Yanagi, Anri Sala, Dayanita Singh, Koki Tanaka, Eric Baudelaire, Ming Wong, Akram Zaatari, Ana Torfs and Cindy Sherman. Herein lies a peculiar difficulty, which Japan has been faced with on repeated occasions.

While some of the artists are celebrated figures, like Cindy Sherman, or Japan-friendly like Dominique Gonzalez Foerster, others have existed on the fringes of awareness, without actually having been a real presence outside of occasional theme shows, like Pierre Huyghe and Isaac Julien. As happens often, the works serve the curatorial intention, illustrating rather participating, as with the odd monochromatic self-portrait pairing of early Cindy Sherman and Ana Torfs.

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² Including in a conference he gave at the International Festival for Arts and Media, Yokohama 2009.



Image 2: Ana Torfs, *Du mentir-faux*, 2000, M HKA–Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, (Installation view, M HKA–Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, 2007) Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp (M HKA) | © photo: Ana Torfs

Likewise with Anri Sala and Eric Baudelaire, exploring collapsed histories through mother figures, Sala interviewing his own and her recollections of communism in Albania, and Baudelaire reconstructing the story of Red Army figure Fusako Sigenobu with the assistance of her daughter May.



Image 3: Anri Sala, Intervista, 1998 © Anri Sala

A final and revealing pairing of circumstance looks at the deglamourized remakes of Hollywood films by artists Miwa Yanagi and Pierre Huyghe. Yanagi stages 'schoolplay' versions of scenes from Cassavetes' *Gloria* and Luc Besson's *Leon*, while Huyghe deconstructs Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* in his astounding piece *The Third Memory*. There may be similarity of purpose, but the difference in ambition is deafening. Yanagi recalls a moment in her student days when film culture participated in the construction and definition of a young person. Those two films have a particular cult status in Japan. Huyghe remakes key scenes from the bank robbery in Lumet's film, starring the real John Wojtowicz, who was played by Al Pacino. Huyghe's two-screen projection, the remake and the actual story of the heist told by Wojtowicz, has its own prologue.

Another room precedes it, highlighting the love story behind the crime that includes an archive interview with Elizabeth Debbie Eden, formerly Ernest Aron. The money was going to be used for Aron's sex reassignment surgery. By this time, the role of the apparatus is overshadowed by the strength of the concepts at play.

It's an elegant path that leads from Broodthaers to Huyghe, and both artists include either the presence, or the image of technology inside their work. But cinema in this instance, in the way the show avoids it by taking shortcuts, needs a re-reading, a re-telling.



Image 4: Pierre Huyghe, *The Third Memory*, 1999 | © Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris/New York

Thanks to Miho Sano for her kind assistance.

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