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Watching Hara

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In September, 2004, at the invitation of Macquarie University's Department of Media and the Australian Film Television and Radio School, filmmaker Hara Kazuo visited Sydney to participate in the Symposium 'Documentary: The Non-Conformists'.¹ His films *A Dedicated Life* and *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* were screened during the weekend. Filmmaker and academic Kathryn Millard interviewed him at the end of his time in Sydney.



Introduction

Hara is known as a filmmaker whose work pushes many boundaries. His feature length documentaries include *Goodbye CP* (1972) *Extremely Private Eros Love Song* (1974) *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (1986) and *A Dedicated Life* (1994). He and his wife Kobayashi Sachiko formed Shisso productions in 1971. Kobayashi has subsequently produced all of their films. Hara's best known work, *The Naked Emperor's Army Marches On*, has proved to be a deeply controversial film. Watching both *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* and *A Dedicated Life* recently, it was their energised central characters or social actors that particularly struck me. People like Okuzaki and Inoue - his counterpart in *A Dedicated Life* - are both *compelled* and *compelling*. As characters, they are active, energised, driven. Perhaps even charismatic. Hara has sometimes referred to his social actors as being like action heroes. But unlike the stars of action films, Hara's characters inhabit worlds that are ever-shifting and morally ambiguous. In most action films, heroes tend to be good, villains bad. Reality is, of course, far more complex. Hara's films borrow from Hollywood in other ways. From westerns with their stories of strangers coming to town, their ambushes and shoot outs - albeit with cameras rather than guns.

Is part of the current renaissance of documentary and non-fiction, I wonder, a renewed interest in a much bigger range of filmmaking genres? Are contemporary documentaries drawing on a much broader range of styles and genres; from satire to the western, the musical, the thriller, animation and melodrama? In film and television, discussion about what documentary and drama share often filters down to lowest common denominator stuff insisting on storytelling based on three acts, cause and effect narrative structures or the hero's journey. While he was making *A Dedicated Life*, Hara spoke with American critic Jeffrey Ruoff about his earlier films.² He talked about what he saw (at that time) as the key difference between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking. Hara insists that we make documentaries about subjects without fully understanding what is likely to unfold, without always knowing what the action will be. Of course, Hara would not be the only filmmaker to insist on the need for documentary to explore, to investigate, to reveal, to resolutely not know all that will happen at the outset. What then, particularly interests me in this are the implications of this kind of approach for scripting. How can we foster documentary writing that leaves room for the filmmaker to breathe, to manoeuvre, to follow unexpected and intriguing tangents, to provoke, even to ambush if necessary?

For me, the role of editing in shaping performances in film, is almost always undervalued. Hara's films are painstakingly edited, so that the flow of information about characters and situations is carefully controlled and nuanced. Events do not unfold as anticipated. These films are surprising. Sometimes - as in *A Dedicated Life* - they shift course mid way. New and contradictory aspects of character are continually revealed as the protagonists carry out their quests. Time unfolds in these films in unexpected and unusual ways; we see the patterns of history as they intersect with individual characters: reality. These are films about grand passions, personal odysseys, quests. And the way that individual lives are imbued with meaning over the long haul.

For all their drama and conflict, this filmmaking is the antithesis of the sound bite or the packaged moment. Films like *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* and *A Dedicated life* have a topicality and resonance way beyond the time frames in which they were made and initially released. Throughout *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* we hear people talk about 'carrying out orders'. Where does collective responsibility end and individual responsibility begin, the film seems to be asking? In the modern world – post 9/11, post Afghanistan, post Iraq, post Tampa and children overboard for us in Australia -- these kind of issues - questions of morality and ethics - are back on the agenda in a big way. And in the wake of the Iraqi prisoners' abuse scandal, journalists around the world have been brushing up on Stanley Milgram's famous experiments about authority, obedience and social control. Experiments where subjects were asked to administer electric shocks as part of a so-called learning exercise.³ A social psychologist, Milgram was concerned with the power of situation. He thought he showed that any normal person can become a killer in a place where killing is called for. He believed that personality – *who you are* – matters less than context – *where you are*. There are lots of criticisms that can be made of Milgram's experiments. Their real value was perhaps their effectiveness as theatre. Hara, too, has an interest in provocation and 'the action documentary'.

Interview with Hara Kazuo

KM: I'm going to start by asking you about the *Naked Emperor's Army Marches On*. I was wondering how you came to meet Okuzaki Kenzo and how the two of you came to an agreement to make a film together?

HK: Imamura Shohei, the director, was preparing for his feature documentary on Japanese post-war history.

KM: Was that *History of Postwar Japan As Told By A Bar Hostess*?

HK: Yes, he was preparing for that film – it was probably around 1967, 1968. At the time, Okuzaki had been involved in an incident with the Emperor and his court case was just beginning. A journalist told Imamura that Okuzaki was a very interesting man. So the first connection was between Imamura and Okuzaki. Imamura was very interested in filming the story but had to give up because of the difficulties of the court case - he could not bring his camera inside the court. However, Okuzaki inspired Imamura who made several documentaries for TV including the story about a soldier who didn't return after the war. Ten years later, I was working for Imamura as an assistant DOP on one of his feature films. I enjoyed working for him, but I was in my late thirties and felt that I wanted to make my own footprint.

KM: A director must feel like that.

HK: So only two days later, I went to see Imamura again. He picked up the phone and rang Okuzaki and said 'This is my assistant. He would like to come and see you'. So my wife, Kobayashi Sachiko, and I went to visit Okuzaki in Kobe. We were at his house from nine until four and he just kept talking and talking and talking. We were completely overwhelmed by both his energy and his story and just knew that he would be a very interesting subject to film. Before that, our films had been completely financed by ourselves. This time, I was hoping that Imamura Productions would finance us or provide at least \$150,000. We were very excited. That part was good! It can be so hard to raise funds. So, to be honest, some of the excitement was - the possibility that someone else might finance the film. The next day I went back to see Imamura and he was very keen to know what I thought of Okuzaki. And I said, 'I think that he is a really great subject, I really want to make this film'. And then Imamura asked me 'How will you raise the money?' and I realised that Imamura was not going to give me any money at all! But I couldn't back down.

KM: So how did you begin filming?

HK: Usually for a documentary you have an idea and then you develop it. But for this film there was a long process. I committed to the film but I wasn't sure what the real story was. I felt that I had to come up with something really

interesting. And Okuzaki kept telling me that it had already been more than thirty years since the war so nobody would want to see another story about the history of the war. But I had this instinct that there was some story about both the war and Okuzaki. I began researching. And luckily, one of the men in the film had good records of the war and lists of all the soldiers' names. I went to talk to him and the story of the cannibalism came up. But I decided not to tell Okuzaki about this.

KM: That is a very interesting decision.

HK: Because I knew Okuzaki's personality and wanted to make him the subject matter. I said 'why don't you go and visit all your ex-comrades and see what you can find out.' And that was the key to the film; knowing there was a story but not telling Okuzaki.

KM: Yes, it is interesting how you use your research to set up a situation for Okuzaki to uncover. It reminds me of how directors sometimes work with actors in rehearsal periods. The directors do not always reveal everything. (Pause) I think one of the strongest things about *Naked Emperor's Army Marches On* is the way that it plays out the events of the war, uncovering truths about the war in the present. It's a film about the war in which it vitally matters to people in the present of the film.

HK: I am very glad that you say this because it is exactly what I wanted to do. This was a story about war and the events of the past. But how do you deal with past events so that you can bring them into present time? The challenge was also to do something about the past in the real time of the shooting. Does that make sense?

KM: Yes. Absolutely.

HK: Okuzaki chose to do something radical with his life, to make his life different. Whereas other ex-soldiers decided to get married or have a home. I wanted to show how all these different people are living in the present tense, too.

KM: I think that comes through, too. One of the things you do as a director is to get Okuzaki, who has made a very different life choice from most people, to confront the other soldiers about the life choices they have made. And, of course, Okuzaki interrogates his fellow soldiers about what happened at the end of the Second World War. It is a film, in part, about ethics. For me, it raises many questions about where collective responsibility ends and individual responsibility begins. I am wondering what ethical questions you faced as the filmmaker during the making of the film?

HK: At the time Okuzaki had been doing scandalous things. Like putting pornography on the faces of photos of the Emperor's family. (Laughs)

KM: He was a troublemaker. (Laughs)

HK: Yes. So for Okuzaki it was like, 'Okay, you are going to make a film about me and there will be a record'. So he felt that he had to do something more - much more scandalous - than what he had been doing! On the 15th of August, the anniversary of the day that Japan surrendered - there was a mourning day in Japan every year. And because Okuzaki was one of the very few survivors from the New Guinea campaign, he would be invited to go inside the Yasukuni shrine where most people couldn't go. So he had a plan to carry a big bunch of flowers with a sword hidden inside them. Inside the shrine, he would take the sword from the flowers and kill all the politicians! He was very excited about the idea of us filming his crime. One thing that was very clear about this man was that he would probably commit a crime while we were filming. For Okuzaki, I would say that crime is a means of self-expression. But I am not saying that I don't have any responsibility for the things that Okuzaki did while we were filming. I was very aware that there were ethical issues. This is a very big consideration for me in the making of 'action documentaries'. I wanted to film in real time and to attempt to understand this man. I didn't only want to understand him in an analytical, conceptual kind of way, but as a human being who was very complex. And once I made that decision - to film everything of what Okuzaki is and how he expresses

himself – there were always going to be ethical issues that I would need to struggle with.

KM: I understand that Okuzaki talked to you about filming a murder? How did you respond to that?

HK: The problem was that I didn't want to commit myself and say either 'yes' or 'no' to Okuzaki's suggestions. So my method was to just listen to him and whatever he had to say. That is, I just kept talking to him without committing to anything. But at least a couple of times, Okuzaki began to distrust me because I wasn't responding. So our relationship started deteriorating. For example, the first time that Okuzaki used violence in the film his tie became caught around his neck. He thought that he was going to die and I didn't help him.

KM: When Okuzaki was in a fight?

HK: Yes, and he felt that, as the filmmaker, I should always be on his side. Later, Okuzaki burst into a rage and said 'I want you to show me all the footage that you have been shooting. All the footage must be presented to me'. That was Okuzaki's exact command. But I didn't want to show him everything so I just selected the best possible images of him to make a montage. And showed it to Okuzaki. Okuzaki was very impressed because he had never seen any footage of himself before. In fact, he was so impressed and happy that he apologised to me for his behaviour. He had been treating me like shit, to be honest. And now he said 'I'd like to thank you. I will commit a crime and I would like you to film me doing it. That is my present to you!'

KM: An unusual present! (Pause) I was wondering if you could tell me about the editing process for *Naked Emperors Army Marches On*. I'm wondering what kind of portrait of Okuzaki emerged initially. As opposed to later in the editing process?

HK: Because Okuzaki was so happy with what he had seen, he started saying that he wished I could edit it himself. He said it would be interesting to make two one hour films comparing my view of him with his own view. I said, 'absolutely no way!'. This was the first time that I had really stood up to him. And then Okuzaki realized that I was quite serious, that filmmaking was not a game. I had edited *Goodbye C.P.* and *Extremely Private Eros Love Song* myself because I was very close to the subject matter. Whereas *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* several layers of story. And I had shot it myself, so I thought it is probably (it is) better to get somebody else to edit it. The problem was that I had a very good editor, a feature film editor of great skill. But he was from an older generation - the generation who had survived the war – and felt that the film should be more clearly against the war. Whereas, when you look at Okuzaki as a person, he is not just simply anti-war. He wears many different masks, I think. And the editor tended to omit these aspects of Okuzaki because of who he was himself and the generation that he was from. This was initially a source of conflict between myself and the editor. For example, even after there was a great deal of disharmony between some of the protagonists in the film, they shared a meal together. I wanted to show all of that, even Okuzaki pouring beer for people as if nothing had happened.

KM: I remember at the Symposium on the weekend, you talked about how sometimes, on the other hand, the editor didn't want to show anything unsympathetic about Okuzaki. He didn't want to include material that was unsympathetic because it would have affected the audience conception of the character. That is a very traditional and conservative dramatic ideal, I think.

HK: Exactly. So there was a constant battle between us.

KM: Do you think that battle was productive for the film?

HK: Hmm. The editor had great skill because there is a lot of material compressed into the story. (And it was shot at a ration of only thirteen to one). But my idea was not just to portray Okuzaki as an anti-war hero but to show where this man found the energy to go against authority. The editor and I had quite a bit of conflict but – in the end - I think it was quite good to have that.

KM: I just wanted to ask more about the term you used, 'action documentary'. So often in documentaries there is this assumption that the camera shouldn't impinge on what is happening, the filmmaker shouldn't impinge on what is happening and that the observational is the purest form of documentary. But the whole point of your films is the camera and the filmmaker must not only impinge but also create events. Can you talk about that some more?

HK: In a way I was thrown a big question from the previous generation of filmmakers: How you going to live your life? Life is not something to sit through while you observe others doing. So, in terms of having a relationship with the subject matter of my films, I want to show that I am part of my times, part of the action and I am responsible, too. Therefore, my films are not like ethnographic films that show events unfolding in front of the camera. My method is to have a subject who will challenge how other people live. And I would call these people anti-authority. As documentary filmmaker, to follow a character who goes against the order is good because there are always some waves that happen as a result. If you put someone who is a non-conformist into an unfamiliar situation, there is always going to be drama. And, as a filmmaker, I like to be part of that situation because I am a non-conformist myself. I always hope that something interesting about human nature will be revealed in these situations.

KM: One of the things which is very strong about your films, is that they always have these central, highly energised characters. Casting is extremely important to your films?

HK: That is exactly why I have made only four documentaries in 20 years. They are not that easy to cast!

KM: One of your early films *Extremely Private Eros Love Song* concerned your own involvement with two women. I'd like to know a bit about that film and how you came to make it.

HK: When I made extremely *Private Eros Love Song*, I felt that I had to make films differently and with a different methodology to the generation of filmmakers before me. *Extremely Private Eros Love Song* is about a love triangle between myself, my then partner and my current wife. And the story of the girlfriend, Takeda Miyuki, who left me, was interesting because the women's liberation movement was just beginning. In that film, I realised that to do something completely different from the previous generation of filmmakers, I had to reveal my own contradictions. As human beings, we all have contradictions. Takeda was a very strong woman and she was constantly verbally abusing me as the director. I needed that kind of strength, not only to conceptualise the story but as a physical energy that I could draw on. *Extremely Private Eros Love Song* was a film I really wanted to make. I felt that many of the films of the previous generation simply expressed the idea that authority was bad and that the individual was always oppressed and I wanted to go beyond that.

KM: How did that experience of turning the camera on an aspect of your own life impact your films? What did you learn from that for your films?

HK: It was a profound experience, of course, to reveal the contradictions, and weakness that I grew up with. Everyone has that sense of inferiority about some things in your life. It was liberating. Revealing yourself is kind of awkward, but at the same time, it is also liberating.

KM: That experience must make it easier to push your documentary subjects a bit to reveal themselves?

HK: Yes, because I reveal myself, too.

KM: How does that help you work with subjects?

HK: I am different from the people in my films. Like Okuzaki and Inoue. But looking back at my work, I can see that each

one of the characters is also a reflection of me.

KM: Let's talk about *A Dedicated Life*. How did you choose to make a film with the writer Inoue Mitsuharu ?

HK: When I am not making my own films, I usually work as a cameraman or assistant director for feature films . I was working for a feature director who really liked *The Naked Emperor's Army Marches On*. He suggested a writer who would really like and understand the film. And then Inoue came to watch the film. He really loved the film but he didn't like Okuzaki at all. I then went to listen to Inoue give a lecture at a bookshop. I immediately felt that he was a very interesting character, almost like an actor. And, instinctively, I felt that it would be interesting to make a film about him. This is where my wife came in too, because she was very much involved in the world of literature and as part of the research for the film as well, she decided to go along to Inoue's lectures and classes. Inoue is such a giant in Japan that it did not feel appropriate to make a film without studying his work and reading his books. And, of course, his body of work was so enormous. So three years passed, and during that three years I showed *Emperor* all over Japan. But then, Sachiko , my wife, came back saying that Inoue had cancer and had just had an operation. I realised that time might not be on our side, so I approached him and asked whether it would be okay to film. And surprisingly, Inoue said 'yes'.

KM: Do you think Inoue's illness was one of the reasons he agreed to appear in the film?

HK: Probably not so much because he has been sick. Although Inoue is different as a person to Okuzaki, they both have a sense of being inferior. Also, he was part of the Japanese literature world and liked the idea of being approached by a filmmaker.

KM: It was flattering?

HK: Yes, it was probably flattering.

KM: It seems to me there is always some contract, often unspoken, between the documentary filmmaker and the subject. Usually people who agree to participate in films have very good reasons for doing so, just as the filmmaker does in making the film. But the nature of that agreement is not talked about very much.

HK: Yes.

KM: One of the things I found fascinating in *A Dedicated Life* is the way that really different aspects of character are revealed throughout the film. It keeps surprising us. For example, with revelations about Inoue's fictionalised versions of his own past. I'm wondering about the research that you did and how you used it? How much did you know early? Was it like *'The Naked Emperor's Army Marches On'*?

HK: The writer Inoue is the subject. This is a writer who writes fictitious stories so well. So there was already a theme about what is really fiction. And, as a director of documentary, you have to ask yourself sometimes what is fiction. My initial approach to him was 'would you be interested in writing your own story and then acting in it.' And Inoue said 'Yes, no problem'. But a month later, he came over, kind of outraged, and said, 'It is your film, why should I write the script? Why don't you do it?'

So Inoue had written an autobiography. And my wife and I asked Inoue about his childhood and where he had grown up. Inoue told us 'Go ahead and do the research. It is a beautiful place'. But there was one condition. He said 'Don't mention my name'. How could we do the research without mentioning his name, we wondered. There were many middle-aged women coming to Inoue to take writing classes. There was one woman, in particular, that Inoue kept mentioning. We didn't know if she was his lover or not. But we rang her asked to come and talk with her. She agreed. But then 30

minutes later we received a call from Inoue. He asked us not to interview the woman. As a filmmaker, what would you do? You want to maintain your relationship with the subject but you are dying to do the research. So I decided to go in secret. It was a kind of –

KM: A secret assignment?

HK: Yes, a secret assignment. I wondered why Inoue was placing so many restrictions on us. So I just started doing research in secret. I began to guess that the events in his life were very different to the way he had written about his life. Inoue said that we could film interviews about his methods of teaching and expressing himself. And also his happiness that his operation had been successful. But, as the director and cameraperson, I was waiting for the opportunity to reveal more than he was telling us.

I believed though that everything he had told us up to that point was the truth. I was particularly interested in the Korean girl he talked about and wanted to locate her. Where is she now, I wondered. I asked Inoue about her. At the time, I didn't notice it but the film captured him looking away a little. As I realised later, the girl was a fictitious character. But Inoue said things like , 'Oh yes, the girl who was working at the brothel is now an old woman. So she may already be sick or even dead. Perhaps she has gone back to Korea.'

KM: Did you give any of your research to the other people in the film? For example, towards the end of the film when relatives are looking into the story.

HK: The last part of the film that takes place in Sakito is true. Everybody says what they really know. You have to understand that where Inoue comes from is a small island called Sakito close to the Korean border. This is a terrible island consumed with difficult politics. So when, in secret, I did the research, I talked to an old women who remembered Inoue when he was young. But because she was so old , she was telling me conflicting information. In his autobiography, Inoue wanted to portray himself as very poor, as someone who had really suffered from poverty. But, in fact, he hadn't. At first I thought the old woman who was telling me the story that conflicted with his story was senile. And I wasn't sure what to believe. But my obsession was to locate the Korean girl and, in the end, it was easy to locate her. The old woman said 'Yes, we had a class reunion and she came along', and I thought 'She was working at the brothel. Wouldn't it be kind of awkward to come to a class reunion?' And the old woman said 'Oh, but she lives nearby'. I traced her and discovered that Inoue's story of the brothel was completely fictionalised.

Now, there was a problem, because many people in Japan were asking a lot of questions over the next year or so. They asked why I did not confront Inoue about his fictionalised past. I wrestled with those questions for two reasons. One, Inoue's cancer was progressing and he was getting weaker. And secondly, do you remember there was a writer in America, a white man who painted himself black and went into black society and wrote about it? Do you remember that?'

KM: Yes. It was called *Black Like Me*.[4](#)

HK: Inoue had read that book and so he told me, 'The lie that you take to the graveyard is like reality. Although it is made-up it almost becomes reality. So it is not a lie'. Inoue also told me that the white man had revealed himself to the black community not long after his deception. But if it had been Inoue, he would have kept up the pretence until he died. And I knew that was Inoue's philosophy on life. So I wrestled with whether I should confront him. But in the end I lost the opportunity to do so.

KM: So this film presented you with ethical dilemmas, too?

HK: Exactly. .

KM: I can see your background as a cameraperson in your films; the careful attention to composition and the way that the camera frames action. There seems to be a tension between action and stillness. What are the advantages and disadvantages as a director of shooting your own films?

HK: The pros and cons are probably about fifty/fifty. There was an episode when I was filming Okuzaki. At the end of the war, the Japanese soldiers and the units were fighting to get the food from the locals. And Okuzaki stole the food that soldiers had themselves stolen from others. Some of those soldiers stayed in the New Guinea for ten years before coming out of the jungle. So Okuzaki visited these soldiers and apologised for what he had done. His behaviour was inhumane, he said. And it was a very emotional moment. As I was filming, others knew that some of the wives behind me were crying. But I didn't know that was happening. I was so consumed with what that was happening in front of me that I did not realise that there was also something behind me. Different emotions, the emotions of the ex-soldier's wives. As a cameraman, you have to react intuitively to what is happening and go for that. My concept of action documentary is backed up by my use of the camera. But, at the same time, the director has to see the whole, that there is a story here and that there is a woman reacting to the story. And sometimes I miss that. So the pros and cons are about fifty/fifty.

KM: The use of sound effects and music seems minimal in your films. Is that deliberate?

HK: I try to work with sound a little, but not too much. I felt that the story of *Naked Emperor's Army Marches On* was so powerful that there was not much space for the sound.

KM: I think your films are made primarily for cinema rather than television. What kind of freedoms does that give you? How do you reach audiences?

HK: It is very difficult in Japan for independents to get commissioned to make documentaries for TV. That means people have to pay to come and see my films. As a filmmaker, I am also wanting to give audiences something that is different, an alternative to the mainstream. Although I primarily make the films that I want to make, I never forget about my audience who are paying to see the films. They want to see something more scandalous, more passionate; something that they could never get from the TV small screen. I am always very aware of that.

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¹ See Edwards, Dan 'Breaking The Doco Mould' Realtme No. 63 www.realtimearts.net/rt63/edwards_doco.html for an account of the weekend and presentations on the films of both Hara Kazuo and Brian Hill

² Ruoff, Jeff 'Japan's Outlaw Filmmaker: An Interview with Hara Kazuo' www.dartmouth.edu/~jruoff/Articles/HaraInterview.htm

³ See Blass, T. Ed. 'Obedience To Authority: Current Perspectives on The Milgram Paradigm' USA 2000

⁴ Griffin J.H Black Like Me, USA, 1961

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