

The Crux

Abé Mark Nornes

Department of Asian Languages and Cultures
University of Michigan, USA

I took this volume in hand with great interest, and not only because I wanted to learn what these writers had to say about Asian documentary. Actually, I was equally curious about the very existence of this special issue. That is because collective efforts like this go beyond the mere descriptive; they also create their objects. Of course, nonfiction films have been made in Asia—by Asians—for well over a century. That does not mean, however, that anyone conceived of something called “Asian documentary.” Indeed, it is only recently that one might think to collect all this scattered and ad hoc creative energy under the single rubric like “Asian documentary.” The vague contours of a regional documentary have taken shape over the last couple of decades, perhaps beginning with the first “Asia Symposium” of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 1989. But back then the pressing question was, “Why are there no Asian filmmakers in the competition section?” and the agenda of the meeting was almost exclusively the sharing of barriers to nonfiction filmmaking back home—not really the films that had been made, were being made or were being dreamt. Today there are documentary festivals scattered all over the region, and most of them highlight Asian documentary. Thus, since 1989 those contours have been filled in, fleshed out, colored, and we have reached a point when someone can imagine a special issue on “Asian documentary,” putting the final touches on that process. In this sense, both *Concentric* and the new book *Asian Documentary Today* (edited by Jane H. C. Yu and Asian Network of Documentary) mark an important milestone in Asian film history.

This is not to say that we have come to an end, and I would suggest that we are also not sitting at a beginning. After all, there are already a hundred-some years of Asian documentaries. No, we are not experiencing an end nor a beginning, but rather a *crux*.

In everyday parlance the term “crux” is usually used in the phrase, “the crux of the matter.” Here, it refers to a vital or decisive point. But points are often pivots, and it is in this sense that I use it for the title of my essay. The English word

originally derives from the Latin *crux interpretum*, or “interpreter’s cross, or torment.” This would be a passage in a text that defies easy interpretation, for whatever reason, and thus demands a vigorous and risky interpretation—risky, because what follows often depends on how the *crux* is handled. This is, in the final instance, why it is so important.

If documentaries say something about the world, particularly through the manner in which they represent it, then occasionally film history will hit a *crux*. Something essential is presented by filmmakers, and how this is read by audiences, critics, and artists changes the course of film history. While reading the essays in *Concentric*, I had the sense that we are amidst one of these *cruxes*. This is a decisive moment for Asian documentary filmmakers; what is going to happen now? To explain what I mean and where we are at, I would like to first point to an earlier *crux* in documentary film: the late 1950s in Japan and the remarkable work of director Hani Susumu.

The Postwar Crux

Of all the countries of Asia, Japan undoubtedly has the longest and most vivacious documentary traditions. This is because of its early industrialization, concentration of capital, and, perhaps most decisively, its status as colonizer and not colonized. Until the mid-1930s most nonfiction film in Japan was a variant of the newsreel, although there was a relatively small avant-garde centered on amateur filmmaking as well as a rowdy left-wing film movement (Prokino).¹ Styles and structures became elaborate and running times longer as the war on the continent grew in intensity. By the late 1930s, Japan was making some of the most impressive documentaries in the world. Broadly speaking, they fell into four categories: newsreels, science films, Griersonian propaganda films (culture films, or *bunka eiga*), and straightforward records of battle campaigns (*senki*).

After the spectacularly traumatic resolution of World War II, the last category naturally fell by the wayside. The tradition of culture film took center stage, although it sloughed off its wartime moniker. A variety of terms took its place, something I will explore in a moment. However, the approach to rendering the world on film was consonant. These films were firmly rooted in the tradition of the British documentary. This was thanks to the embrace not of John Grierson, but of Paul Rotha. Although most of the world—including Britain—has virtually forgotten

¹ For more information on this era of nonfiction film, please see my *Japanese Documentary Film*.

Rotha, he remains a powerful figure in the history of film theory in Japan. This is because his book *Documentary Film* was translated just as the Japanese government poured money into documentary production in the late 1930s, the very moment when filmmakers were hammering out their approaches to nonfiction film. There were competing translations, debates, and even after the war the book was repeatedly reprinted. It was even retranslated in the 1960s.²

It must be pointed out, however, that the filmmaking that Rotha espoused was essentially what we think of as the Griersonian documentary. The one-off definition he deployed was Grierson's own: "the creative treatment of actuality." This remains a powerful and perplexing phrase. In fact, I will argue that it is at the heart of the current crux of Asian documentary. Back in the 1930s, its meaning was vigorously debated. And by World War II, its parameters generally settled: creative treatment meant that filmmakers would use the world as their raw material, and craft a coherent representation that usually contained some kind of claim or argument. In the postwar era, when the American Occupation relied on documentary to democratize Japan in what it saw as a process of defascistization, those arguments about the world became more structural. They gave the film form, and thus the craft of documentary filmmaking increasingly relied on screenwriting. Creative treatment of actuality came to mean the writing of a scenario, the casting of non-actors, and storytelling based on the continuity style of Hollywood. This was the standard, in Japan and in most of the world.

Consider the example of *Children's Parliament* (*Kodomo no kaigi*, 1947), one of the more celebrated of the Occupation era films. It is set in a school located in the ruins of Tokyo's Yotsuya district. Students are happy, but their poverty is marked by their clothing. They have obviously lost nearly everything, and are living in a time of privation. This becomes an issue at the school, when the rains come and few children possess umbrellas. On the suggestion of their teacher, the students decide to take the matter into their own hands and hold a formal meeting to discuss and resolve the problem. Not surprisingly, their efforts are rewarded with success. Obviously, this film throws onto the screen a vision of democratic action for people to model their own lives on. In fact, the Occupation sprinkled the countryside with 16mm projectors to show films like *Children's Parliament*, and sent each print with a pamphlet describing its ideological agenda and containing elaborate instructions on how to hold an effective meeting about the issues raised.

² For a close textual analysis of these competing translations, see my "*Pôru Rûta* and the Politics of Translation."

Typical of the times, this film was highly pedagogical—as was its style. The film was completely scripted. While the children were non-professionals, their stilted performance clearly reveals the staginess of the whole affair. Furthermore, all dialogue scenes faithfully keep the camera to one side of the stageline, deploy eyeline matching, and carefully stage the action with the shot-reverse shot figure. The director also employs all the other hallmarks of continuity editing, such as matching on action and careful transitions using establishing shots.

The key thing here, however, is that *this was accepted as a powerful, effective, and adequate representation of the world*. However, this adequateness only lasted up to the postwar crux.

This crux is marked by the release of Hani Susumu's *Children of the Classroom* (*Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi*, 1954). Most people associate Hani with major feature films like *Bad Boys* (*Furyo shonen*, 1961), *He and She* (*Kare to kanojo*, 1963), and *Nanami: The Inferno of First Love* (*Hatsukoi: Jigokuhen*, 1968). These were wonderfully creative features that blurred the line between fiction and documentary, but Hani started his career making a set of extraordinary documentaries. Hani was only in his early 20s when he made *Children of the Classroom*. He had just started working in the film and photography unit of Iwanami, a powerful publisher in Japan. The film started out as a Ministry of Education-funded short designed for potential teachers, and preproduction followed the usual course of action with the writing of a script. The film that emerged at the end of this conventional process was utterly novel.

In the course of his research, Hani had noticed that children began ignoring his presence after only a few hours. He reoriented his film around this phenomenon, and ended up capturing the normal, everyday interaction of students in the classroom with a spontaneity that was absolutely stunning at the time. Even today, it is quite striking and unusually charming. There were a few sequences that appear staged, but they are discreet and are constructed more like the observational capture of real conversation, as opposed to scripted dialogue rendered in shot-reverse shot.

One must remember that this was 1954. It is six full years before the release of the Drew Associates' *Primary* (1960), the film that usually gets credited for the creation of direct cinema. This is the style of documentary sometimes mislabeled *cinéma vérité*, an approach likened to the perspective of a “fly on the wall.” Hani deployed this observational documentary to a different end than the later Americans. While the latter emphasized the achievement of a new objectivity in cinema, Hani used observational style to get into the heads of his subjects and explore their

subjectivity. He quickly followed this film up, elaborating his approach, with a sequel entitled, *Children Who Draw* (*E o kaku kodomotachi*, 1956).

Other filmmakers at Iwanami quickly followed, mingling Griersonian pedagogy with startling scenes of spontaneous human interaction. Two prominent examples were directed by women (another sign of Iwanami's flexible and progressive approach to managing their stable of filmmakers): *Town Politics: Mothers Who Study* (*Machi no seiji: Benkyo suru okaasa*, 1957) by Tokieda Toshie and *School for Village Women* (*Mura no fujingakkyu*, 1957) by Haneda Sumiko. These films were equally wonderful for the spontaneity and naturalness of their subjects.³ Their very existence called attention to the artifice of all the other documentaries of the time, and people began to question the adequateness of their "treatment of actuality."

The year of the crux was 1955. This was when Iwanami took the top three slots in prestigious *Kinema Junpo* year-end poll. Best documentary of the year was *Record of a Single Mother* (*Hitori no haha no kiroku*, 1955). Second place went to the standard science film *The Birth of a Frog* (*Kaeru no hassei*, 1955), and *Children of the Classroom* placed third. That year's Education Film Festival also awarded its top awards to the same three works. The presence of *Record of a Single Mother* and *Children of the Classroom* on the same bill spawned a great debate among critics and filmmakers. They pointed out that the filmmakers of the former film went to a village with script in hand, looked at all the villagers, and cast them by the principle of typage. In this way, they assembled a family that seemed "typical" to the filmmakers and served their script more than reality. There was nothing unusual about this method; however, it appeared less than truthful when compared with the genuineness of Hani's film.

There were other debates, both on and off the pages of the film magazines. One is particularly important for us. It centered on *White Mountains* (*Shiroi sanmyaku*), a documentary produced in 1957. This was a non-descript nature film about Japan's Alps. A loud controversy erupted when a scientist noticed that the film featured species that were unknown to the region, including a bear that has no business being there—but which the script obviously called for. *Kinema Junpo* devoted a special section to the debate over the film, prominently adding to the discourse questioning conventional documentary style. They called it "'Truth' and

³ Haneda's film also features wonderful moments of *cinéma vérité* amidst the direct cinema observation of the women. For example, in one scene the director gives the women essays written by their children about the subject of "Mother." The scene is shot in direct cinema style, but the situation is an intervention planned by the director in the *vérité* mode.

‘Lies’ in Documentary Film,” and solicited articles from major writers like director Kamei Fumio, critic Iida Shinbi, and, naturally, Hani Susumu.⁴

I would like to highlight the articles by Iida and Hani which, in retrospect, seem to me to represent a missed opportunity of grand proportions. In “The Documentary-ness and Fictiveness of Cinema,” Iida Shinbi issues a fascinating metaphor to think through the relationship of “truth” and “lies,” or “documentary” and “fiction.” He compares this aspect of cinema to light. If one sends the clear light of reality through the camera lens, its glass acts like a prism. The light is separated out into a spectrum. It spreads from blue on one end to red on the other. Blue would be cinema’s “documentary-ness” (*dokyumento-sei*) and red would be its “fictiveness” (*fikushon-sei*). In the realm of the theatrical feature film, one could think of neorealism appearing very bluish, and the musical as a deep, crimson red—but one could place any given film anywhere on the spectrum, depending on its relationship to fictiveness or documentary-ness.

The documentary also has a spectrum of possibilities. Iida points to the “*jissha kiroku*” or “record of actuality” film as exemplifying an indigo documentary-ness. With this term, he means travelogues, nature films, sports films, and the like. However, when it comes to films like *White Mountains*, filmmakers are inserting a fictiveness he finds disconcerting and even dangerous. He calls on filmmakers to take this issue up and give it serious thought. What exactly is the place of artifice (*sakui*)? Or is there a place for it at all in the documentary form?

Iida fails to take an overt position by the end of his article, but he does seem to think it common sense that documentary filmmakers do not have the option of spreading their practice across the entire spectrum of reality’s light. Most people, Iida asserts, assume that the light of actuality enters the prism of the documentary filmmaker’s lens and splits into *only two colors*: blue or red. He also assumes that spectators expect blue. This does come into tension with the creative intentions of the filmmakers, but Iida calls for a debate over how far we should be willing to let filmmakers move from the blue end of the spectrum. This is the very issue that each essayist in the special issue grapples with, each in their own way. They see the creativity of “the creative treatment of actuality” in a brand new way, as a kind of artifice. The writers do see this artifice as a problem of degree; however, the very

⁴ The special section includes articles by Iida Shinbi, Ara Masato, Ogura Shinbi, Morimoto Tetsuro, Kamei Fumio, and Hani Susumu and may be found in the 15 April 1957 issue of *Kinema Junpo*. They are reprinted in *Besuto obu Kinema Junpo 1950-1966 (Best of Kinema Junpo 1950-1966)*.

existence of *Children of the Classroom* and its progeny prompt them to insert the term “*yarase*,” or “faking it,” into the discourse on the documentary.

To put this in the terms of Iida’s metaphor, Hani’s films suddenly recast the color blue itself. The standard documentary takes on a reddish glow, and its representation of reality comes to look inadequate or suspicious or fictive.

Hani’s own contribution to the special issue on *White Mountains* is rather short, but he takes a curious position and interestingly enough is given the last word. While Iida suggests that documentary has no spectrum, is either red or blue, Hani downplays the difference between fiction and documentary. He describes what he thinks might be the ideal process for nonfiction film: the director enters the phenomenological world, camera in hand, and encounters discovery after discovery. Each one of these changes not only the film, but the filmmaker as well. This is to say, it boils down to two issues: the character of the filmmaker enmeshed in reality and the nature of film. These roughly correspond to Hani’s legacy and a missed opportunity of consequence.

In the Japanese documentary, Hani is remembered as the director that opened nonfiction to new approaches. One of the most amazing things about *Children of the Classroom* and *Children Who Draw* is that they embody the radical shift from Griersonian films to direct cinema and *vérité*, years before those terms were even invented. Significantly, Hani’s works were circulating globally. They won international awards, and were purchased by many university libraries (including my own at University of Michigan). However, they failed to make a dent in foreign documentary practice. Instead, it took a team of well-funded journalists from *Life* magazine. Such is the fate of many Asian filmmakers. The West is slow to recognize their brilliance; and even when it does, it often seems impervious to the rich possibilities they present. Filmmakers from *here* simply do not go *there* for inspiration.

While Hani left no legacy on the international film scene, he certainly did in Japan. Looking at his films we see the first appearance of direct cinema in world film history; however, the spin he was putting on documentary was qualitatively different than that of the Americans who took the lime light in the early 1960s. As Brian Winston has demonstrated, the initial rhetoric of filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman, Richard Leacock, Robert Drew, and the Maysles Brothers was filled with claims about the objectivity of their practice (perhaps this is not surprising, considering that they came out of fields like law and the physical sciences). By way of contrast, Hani did not pitch his own approach in terms of objectivity, but rather *veracity*. It had something to do with truth claims, and in dialogue with other critics

and filmmakers this gets worked out through both a recognition of the force the filmmaker's subjectivity exerts on the world, *and* the ethics that binds that subjectivity to objects of cognition. And it is the fact that these objects are almost always fellow human beings that these issues are explored—in criticism, but especially in filmmaking itself—as a set of ethical challenges. A documentary does not start and end with its subject matter; it is also the permanent trace of the relationship between filmmaker and subject, and this has profound implications for documentary practice.

This legacy of Hani helps explain why the most celebrated documentaries of the postwar period are by two filmmakers that were colleagues of Hani at Iwanami. His assistant director, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, left the PR film world to start a career-long series of searing documentaries on Minamata Disease. And Ogawa Shinsuke, an assistant director at Iwanami, created a collective of young student activists to make a series of films about the massive protests at the Narita Airport construction site. Both the Minamata Series and the Sanrizuka Series are filled with pitched battles with riot police, where social actors are not *scripted*, but beating each other senseless. The cameramen (also Iwanami alumni) actually threw themselves in between the protesters and police, entering these *mêlées* wearing ad hoc armor to protect themselves.

This direct cinema style rendering of state violence is only a small part of these films. If it were the only thing, it would be far closer in theoretical positioning to the American direct cinema filmmakers. No, Tsuchimoto and Ogawa were deeply indebted to Hani Susumu. This is because the point of this newly fresh and spontaneous documentary style was not to “disappear the camera,” but to come into such a close relationship to the “object” that the camera was capturing a relationship that led (the filmmakers and their audiences) to the interior worlds of the people being filmed. This helps explain why Ogawa could place a camera at a table with a group of peasants contemplating the ethics of violence and let them slowly and quietly dialogue for seventeen whole minutes. It is why he could let them talk at their own pace, leaving in all the silent gaps when people are just sitting there contemplating each other's opinions; one of the pauses is over two minutes long with nothing but the sound of falling rain on the soundtrack. This also helps explain Tsuchimoto's remarkably moving patience when interviewing Minamata victims, conducting the interviews on *their* terms even though they can barely communicate.

While Hani's legacy is strong, he also represents a missed opportunity—a crux often involves this kind of paradox. It is striking to me that over the past sixty years of film history—that is, post-Hani documentary—the landscape conforms to

the choices Hani made in his own career back in the early 1960s. As we saw in the *White Mountains* debate, he saw little value in striking a difference between fiction and documentary film. This is a position he held his entire life, emphatically taking it at a 2013 symposium in his honor at Harvard University.⁵ He dedicated his career to folding one into the other.

However, he did this through the format of the feature film. In other words, he moved into the realm of fictional narrative, bringing his documentary theory and practice with him. That he and many others did not bring the fiction of feature filmmaking into the documentary in new and equally experimental ways is actually rather fascinating—and absolutely unfortunate. Was it easier to *imagine* ways of integrating documentary into fiction than vice versa? Were there theoretical questions they were contemplating that the documentary simply did not serve? Or was it a more practical matter, such as the attraction of capital (both monetary and cultural) of the feature film world? Or a lack of funding structures to support an experimental film practice? This was, after all, happening in the context of the PR film world, and when filmmakers like Kuroki Kazuo and Tsuchimoto pushed stylistic or ideological limits, their films were unceremoniously shelved.

Whatever the case, in Japan the creative exploration of fiction was the domain of the feature film, and when you did find it in independent 16mm films it was relegated to the “experimental.” The mingling of fact and fiction, or the overt expression of the filmmaker’s creativity and subjectivity, was walled off from the documentary. It was not until Ogawa Shinsuke’s *Sundial Carved with a Thousand Years of Notches: The Magino Village Story* (*Sennen kizami no hidokei: maginomura monogatari*, 1986) that we saw a sophisticated and creative attempt to let documentary mingle productively with fiction. This was, after all, a perfect “performance” of the science documentary (*kagaku eiga*), but it was filled with fictional sequences starring major figures like the butoh dancer Hijikata Tatsumi and the Roman Porno star Miyashita Junko. This is to contemplate the meaning—and even ontological status—of history in village Japan.

That is the crux. Why was this unimaginable in the immediate wake of *Children of the Classroom*? This question was posed to Hani at Harvard in 2013, and he seemed unable to answer it.

⁵ This essay was partly based on a presentation I gave at a symposium connected to this retrospective organized by the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, “As If Our Eyes Were in Our Hands—The Films of Susumu Hani” (January 19-28, 2013). I am grateful to the Institute, Alex Zahlten, and Harvard Film Archive’s Haden Guest for including me in this historic event.

The Present-day Crux

In his contribution to the *White Mountains* debate, Hani Susumu looked toward the growing popularity of 8mm film for hope and inspiration, anticipating the day that there would be new forms of documentary emerging from these amateurs—even documentary psychodramas or documentary comedies. We may have reached that day at the beginning of this new millennium. Putting the exceptional case of Japan to the side, Asian documentary has come to an important moment when its course for the foreseeable future will be decided. This is to say, we arrive at another crux in the history of Asian documentary film.

The works of non-professionals on amateur formats have driven this development. One of the first important sites for this growth was the Philippines, where a lively Super-8 scene produced a mix of fiction, documentary, and experimental films in the 1980s—this in addition to the 16mm films of Kidlat Tahimik. And what is Tahimik’s approach if not Hani’s “documentary comedy” cross-pollinated with the home movie?

However, most Asian documentaries over the last two decades of impressive growth have been Griersonian at heart. They are either highly scripted, grafting series of interviews into a cohesive whole, or they are observational variations of direct cinema. As Annette Hamilton points out in “Witness and Recuperation,” many of these interview-based films are passionate engagements of history through the trope of testimony. Many deal with regions of recent history that governments and/or communities of people have covered up or actively forgotten. The eyewitness thus becomes a crucial tool in remembering, and by extension constructs alternative histories on media that will outlive the witness.

Alternatively, observational modes of documentary were clearly attractive to filmmakers opposing the speciousness of conventional, expository documentary modes associated with government propaganda. The rough, urgent works of early video activist collectives in 1980s-90s Korea and Taiwan make this palpable. However, the best example of this tendency may be found today in the People’s Republic of China. While there are experimental films, gallery installations, personal essay films, and the like, the independent Chinese documentary scene is dominated by direct cinema. This is where their values lie, aesthetic values driven by a search for some kind of truth. In her “Afterword” for this volume, Kuei-fen Chiu parses this dynamic:

It goes without saying that this belief implies a notion of documentary filmmaking as a film practice that engages the notion of “truth.” If imagination is key to the shaping of a feature film, truth is key to the production of a documentary film. Documentarians may transgress the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and make all kinds of bold experiments that problematize documentary’s tie with the historical world; it nevertheless remains the case that the stakes involved in documentary making and viewing are quite different from those for feature films. If commercial interests and artistry are pivotal issues for feature films, documentary films are concerned most of all with the production of “truth,” no matter how this intriguing concept is defined, problematized, and even dramatized in documentary works.

This probably encapsulates the position of most documentary filmmakers in Asia. It is also a conception of documentary radically at odds with the stance Hani took in his article on *White Mountains*. Indeed, to return to Iida’s metaphor, Chiu’s prism for documentary separates the light of reality into mainly red and blue. True, films are made across the spectrum, but seen through her lens a film edges us toward “truth” to the extent that it lies on the blue end of that spectrum. Later she writes, “Documentary conceptualized essentially as cinematic art tends to be evaluated in terms of the artistic creativity of the documentary maker.” I suspect this is correct, that most documentary filmmakers and their audiences think this way. Furthermore, this helps explain the prevalence of direct cinema and Griersonian documentary—discourses of sobriety, as Bill Nichols so memorably puts it in *Representing Reality*:

Documentary film has a kinship with those other nonfictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourses of sobriety. Science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare—these systems assume they have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences. Their discourse has an air of sobriety since it is seldom receptive to “make-believe” characters, events or entire worlds (unless they serve as pragmatically useful simulations of the “real” one). Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them

power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are the vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will. (3-4)

Nichols published his book in 1991, when it is probably true that the vast majority of the films being produced in Asia were staid and sober. However, as many of the writers of this volume point out, this was precisely when documentary exploded in the region. We can chart this fairly easily by looking at the entries to Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival's New Asian Currents program (*Ajia Senpa Banpa*, literally "The Countless Onrushing Waves of Asia"). The festival established this ongoing sidebar in direct response to the first Asia Symposium in 1989, when Ogawa and company wondered why there were no Asian documentaries in the competition. Arguably, it became the most important section of the festival as the Asian nonfiction scene became increasingly vibrant—and interconnected, thanks in part to Yamagata. The first programs had a low bar, but it became increasingly difficult to enter as the number of entries exponentially increased. The 2011 edition had 705 submissions from sixty-three countries, this from only a handful of films in its first edition in 1991. In the very same period, documentary film festivals appeared in Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, mainland China, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

Needless to say, not all of these Asian films fall into the discourse of sobriety. This is because we have arrived at the moment Hani anticipated back in 1957. Asian documentary has enjoyed explosive growth because it grew out of the home movie. To this day, the majority of these films are accomplished on amateur or semi-professional video cameras and edited on home PCs. That this technological revolution arrived as dictatorships fell and censorship strictures loosened as propitious timing. As (essentially amateur) filmmakers found the ability to make films outside industrial or broadcasting settings, the aesthetic rules bound to highly capitalized production fell by the wayside. Staid and conventional styles like the interview form and direct cinema may have become the indies' mainstream, but not all Asian documentary is captured by the term "discourses of sobriety."

For example, two prominent directors that immediately come to mind are Jia Zhangke and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Both shoot feature films that compete at the most famous film festivals in the world; both shoot fiction and documentary, and in whichever the mode they blend fact and fiction. In other words, they took the path that Hani turned away from, when he split his practice into decidedly conventional documentary and highly experimental, documentary-inflected feature

films. Jia and Apichatpong, in contrast, practice a kind of filmmaking that really does rub out the differences between fiction and documentary in exciting ways. Other established veterans who decisively turn away from the discourses of sobriety are Kawase Naomi and Tsuchiya Yutaka in Japan, Kidlat Tahimik and Nick Deocampo in the Philippines, and Trinh T. Minh-ha in Vietnam/US. However, the pages of *Concentric* are filled with ample examples of up-and-coming filmmakers that locate their practice in this creative and unconventional territory, such as Malaysia's Amir Muhammad (*The Last Communist [Lelaki Komunis Terakhir]*), Singapore's Eng Yee Peng (*Diminishing Memories 2*), Cambodia's Davy Chou (*Golden Slumbers [Le Sommeil d'or]*), and Thailand's Uruphong Raksasad (*Agrarian Utopia [Sawan Banna]*).

Shortly after Bill Nichols published *Representing Reality*, he was forced to revise his position on documentary as a discourse of sobriety. For one thing, it is too easy to point to the rich vein of moving image practice that is too often walled off from documentary through terms like “experimental,” “avant-garde,” or “video art.” Only minor adjustments to most definitions of documentary could rub out the boundaries between these fields. And this is most definitely necessary if we are to account for filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and so many others. To keep documentary open to all the possibilities of screen art is to ensure a rich and vibrant scene that points us to novel and exciting ways of seeing the world and thinking about history, truth, and all that matters. This is why Nichols swiftly followed up his book with *Blurred Boundaries* in 1994, when he essentially recants on his position and adds “poetic” and “performative” to his formerly sober list of modes.

We are at a crux in the history of Asian documentary. It is a moment both vital and puzzling, and a read of this special issue of *Concentric* makes this crystal clear. The vicissitudes of political institutions and the rapid flux of technological change have created a moment when the documentary is open to many possibilities. Definitions are flexible. Conventions are elastic. It is strikingly similar to that earlier moment in late 1950s Japan, which reminds us that cruxes are also pivot points. A sober, and regrettably dull, documentary is certainly a possibility if filmmakers so deeply identify documentary value with observation and first-person testimony. I wish to highlight the path marked by poetry and delirium and joy. That is the crux.

Works Cited

- Hani, Susumu. "Genba no Memo Kara" ("From a Memo from the Location"). *Besuto obu Kinema Junpo 1950-1966 (Best of Kinema Junpo 1950-1966)*. Tokyo: Kinema Junposha, 1994. 587.
- Iida, Shinbi. "Eiga ni Okeru Kirokusei to Kyokosei" ("The Documentary-ness and Fictiveness of Cinema"). *Besuto obu Kinema Junpo 1950-1966 (Best of Kinema Junpo 1950-1966)*. Tokyo: Kinema Junposha, 1994. 580-82.
- Nichols, Bill. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- . *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Nornes, Abé Mark. *Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era through Hiroshima*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- . "Pôru Rûta and the Politics of Translation." *Cinema Journal* 38.3 (1999): 91-108.
- Rotha, Paul. *Documentary Film*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.
- Winston, Brian. "The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription." *Theorizing Documentary*. Ed. Michael Renov. New York: Routledge, 1993. 37-57.
- Yu, Jane H. C., and Asian Network of Documentary, eds. *Asian Documentary Today*. Busan: Busan International Film Festival, 2012.

About the Author

Abé Mark Nornes is Professor of Asian Cinema at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he is also the Chair of the Department of Screen Arts and Cultures. He worked in various roles for the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival for over a decade. His books include *Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era through Hiroshima*, *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary*, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (all University of Minnesota Press), and *A Research Guide to Japanese Cinema* (University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies Publication Program). He is currently writing a monograph on the relationship of calligraphy and East Asian cinema.