Truth For Sale: The Consumption Of Documentary Film at The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival

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INTRODUCTION

Rewinding

The auditorium was packed. The press filled the aisles with tripods. On stage a comedy duo did a comedy-duo thing, they bantered, as the crowd watched, eagerly awaiting the presentation of awards. This ceremony officially closed the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF) 2001. When the names of the recipients were announced they obediently took to the stage, but then quickly went back to their seats. Only one of the filmmakers paused to make an Oscar-style acceptance speech. The festival ended with the judges' decree. And as everyone made for the exit, I wondered what it meant.

Yamagata City is located 350 kilometers north of Tokyo in a rural, mountainous region of Japan. In the afternoons, uniformed school children and older citizens fill the downtown shopping area. But biennially, when it hosts an International Documentary Film Festival the downtown area boasts more foreigners than usually and
shop windows are decorated with festival posters. The streets fill with directors, noted scholars, film lovers, translators, and art students. Many people sat around in local soba shops talking about films, especially about *Devotion*. It was much anticipated because it probed the filmmaking techniques of the festival’s founder Ogawa Shinsuke. Outside the theatres, some directors passed out fliers promoting their films. Over the years, the YIDFF Network (an organizing committee) has established a film library, newsletters, as well as bimonthly film showings. The festival has grown beyond its parameters. And inside its parameters it has undergone renovations. 2001 marked the first year that videos were shown in the festival competition. This change is drastic considering the high costs of developing 35mm film and the recent trends towards shooting with hand held, digital-video cameras. Yet the festival format has remained intact. Almost all the directors attended to discuss their films after the screening.

Documentary film, like all film exists as a consumer product. (A consumer product is a relatively new phenomenon that probably arose from the invention of mass production and marketing. It's something that can be marketed to wide audiences as cultural products; therefore the cultural worth has socio-economic and/or socio-political value rather than artisanal or historical value.) It is mass-produced media, played in theatres while the masses flicker in its glow. Several theorists have probed the schema of mass culture. One of the earliest comprehensive works on consumer culture is by Theodor Adorno. His theoretical concept called "The Culture Industry" asserts that the relationship between consumer and product usurps honest reflection about culture and replaces it with "fictive" value judgments. How does this fiction interact with documentary film and the element that gives it value: truth?

![Figure 2. Theatre Card for Devotion](image)

**The Schema of the Culture Industry**

Theodor Adorno belonged to the Frankfurt School of sociology. He belonged to an era when phonographs and cinemas became the driving force of cultural transference. The effects of mass-produced cultural goods possessed Adorno’s theoretical framework. In a nutshell, he takes Marx’s view that the relationship between commodity and society has little to do with producer/consumer relations; but rests solely on the
consumer’s identification with the product (33). The product, then severed completely from its mode of production, has a vulnerable definition of its value.

Adorno then applies the same value derivation to cultural products. He uses the make-up of an actress as a metaphor to further elucidate this problem. The mythical actress works her way through the scenario--braving the slave trade or surviving the typhoon. The film tries to represent "real life," yet all the while the actress' make-up gives her the appearance of unperturbed beauty: "[The actress] is so closely, so precisely, and so pitilessly photographed that the magic which her make-up is intended to exert is heightened by the lack of illusion with which it is thrust before the viewer as literally true and unexaggerated. Mass culture is unadorned make-up" (67-68). In other words, mass culture tricks the viewer into believing the fictitious beauty is really true. And this fiction, along with the relationship between consumer and product creates the subconscious language in which a capitalist society transfers culture. To Adorno this language "impedes the development of autonomous, individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (92). Adorno’s theory relies on the generalization that all members of consumer society are so easily duped. Despite the simplicity and vulgarity of that claim, it still holds sway because fictive value judgments have formed a basis of expression in today's world.

Dispersion of News

I arrived in Yamagata on a warm October afternoon, at which time I was hurried into the festival's newsroom and was overloaded with information about how the festival worked: Almost everything had been already arranged, the maps to theatres had been printed, the films had been subtitled. All that remained was the daily news, which had to be collected and translated daily. Basically my job consisted of proofreading articles, translating updates, and conducting interviews with some of the English-speaking guests. Over the course of one week, over 150 films would be screened and it was the job of the Daily Bulletin staff to disperse information to the film-goers in the form of interviews, reports, etc., a miniature version of Documentary box dedicated to festival events. (Documentary Box is a journal affiliated with the festival that strives to offer thorough explanation of documentary culture.) I had been working in the newsroom for a couple of days before I began to notice subtle scrimmages that took place between the Yamagata Office and the Tokyo Office. The Tokyo Office, which edits Documentary Box, wanted the Daily Bulletin's focus to be on the conferences that the festival hosted; while the Yamagata Office, dedicated more to the promotional side of the affair wanted to have the newsletter centered more around the visceral and intellectual ambiance of the festival. With the Yamagata office at the helm, the Daily Bulletin geared towards promoting the atmosphere of the festival. For example, the headlines that made the front page the 2nd day of the festival included: "Excitement and Expectation in the Air," "Mr. Ogawa! Are you Watching," "Dedicated to Shinsuke Ogawa," "I Appear in this Film as a Worker. Please Look For Me," and "YIDFF Merchandise Selling Well" (Volume 2). The Yamagata office dutifully managed the atmosphere of the festival. In the end, the dispersion of news that manifested in the Daily Bulletin divided almost equally into two parts: Interviews with the directors and atmospheric pieces about Yamagata. One article that struck my attention began, "The 'Find Out Yamagata' sightseeing tour began with a visit to a sake brewery. It was still morning, but fifteen filmmakers were knocked out on treasured sake, which cannot be found in stores" (Volume
And it concluded, after further details, "The great filmmakers were regular human beings after all" (Volume 5, 4). The idea that these filmmakers were regular people underlines Adorno's idea of the fictive nature of cultural goods. The directors are the products (produced by Daily Bulletin). Interaction with the film festival makes them "great," while interaction with the city "normalizes" them when really they haven't undergone any change at all. This off-the-wall promotion made me reflect on how I had been drawn into the festival's web.

My first encounter came through reading an article from Documentary Box as part of a class assignment. As I consumed more and more articles, published in Documentary Box, I began to think YIDFF would be an interesting thing to experience. And so, like many others, I was sucked in. It wasn't until I was at the festival that I realized Documentary Box and The Daily Bulletin were similar promotional items.

People flocked to Yamagata and instead of becoming Adorno's consumers of cultural products they transformed into some other incarnation of consumer because they were introduced to both product and producer (directors, camera operators, etc). As you'll recall, the masking of labor was the seed of Adorno's problem. Though the introduction of directors happens readily at most film festivals; it's different in the case of documentary film.

In the frame, four legs intertwine, the flesh tone gradates with luminescence. At first it's hard to give form to the images. Takashi Toshiko's camera probes intercourse with her with her lover, gradually moving the camera across the body without revealing the faces. Her slow-paced film, Blessed, shuffles between three scenarios: her with her lover, an exhibitionist's show, and a conversation with two elderly women, who live in her childhood home, a cramped apartment in an Osaka slum. The director adds long black periods betweens scenes as if she composed the film as a bunch of disconnected memories from her life. But the scenes are connected by the visual element of nudity. The two elderly women in Osaka talk crudely about their medically scarred bodies and are clearly unaware that they are being filmed. During the Q&A session with the director, Abé Marcus Nornes (film scholar) asked gingerly: "The camera seems to embody three elements. First, there's a consensual camera that depicts the two lovers. Then there's the contractual camera, wherein the exhibitionist shows her body. And last there's the exploitative camera that captures the two elderly women. The last camera poses an ethical problem" (Nornes, Personal Communication, October 7, 2001). This opened the floor for the director to comment on the reasoning behind her hidden-camera technique. Because of documentary's gesture to truth, members of the audience were moved to question the ethical or unethical way in which images are gathered.

The film Danchizake (Homemade Sake) followed Ono Satoshi, as he turns the camera towards his family and his questionable disdain for them. His parents are divorced. Something that is very unconventional in Japan. The mother has a job and an apartment; while he and his father live in public housing. The father paints but has no formal job. The film contrasts the mother ridiculing the father's lifestyle of painting against the father's colorful retorts. The director carefully weighs this strange conflict against something that is quintessentially Japanese: sake making and drinking. A good portion of the film handles images of rice fermenting, a metaphor for the director's pain slowly fermenting within the film. After the screening, the director was handed the
microphone and he, along with his father answered audience questions. (Many of the directors brought their casts with them.) The audience asked direct questions about the director's relationship with the film, his relationship with his father, and commented on how the quality of the narration affected them. These consumers are supposedly not Adorno's dupes, nor was the film supposed unadorned make-up, though it was mass culture perpetuated by the YIDFF network. During the Q&A it was announced that the father had brought along a vat of homemade sake and wanted us to try it. The taste was surprisingly crude.

I think that documentary cannot escape even the smallest bit of reflection by the audience. Even if the director is not present the audience can still ask the simple question: "Is it true or is it staged?" And given the easy accessibility of most documentary filmmakers through e-mails or web pages people could get some answers to their questions. And when these answers come, the consumer can make the identification that they're not consuming for the truth, documentary's apparent value; but have used truth to place the documentary within their own original dialogue. They see it.

Figure 3. Poster for Sky-Blue Hometown

I Saw It at Yamagata

After the last of the award-winning films had been announced, and as the press raced towards the press conference, I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen a single one of the winning films though I had spoken to most of the directors. In those cases, I somehow managed to consume the producer and not the product. But the microcosm of consumer society, which was YIDFF 2001, seemed to purport strange consumer situations like that one. Nowadays, documentary film exists in a bubble, it doesn't get much play alongside Hollywood films in the local movie houses. It's pretty much reserved to small audiences. Documentary filmmaker, Tsuchiya Yutaka, works with film, but he also works with audiences--he wants to know their reactions. His activist group VIDEO ACT promotes the distribution of documentary and experimental film. In an interview in Documentary Box he comments on the artist's perspective of a Culture Industry-like scenario (though he does not use that term):
People who are making music on their own end up being products in a commercial world. People in the indies scene realize that they can become commodities, and that working on that level means money, so they reject going major and stay where they are. That just brings in commercialism again, and everything becomes packaged and people think that you can't do anything about it. When the people who've realized this and dropped out have a hard time, they wonder where the exit is" (Documentary Box).

Tsuchiya and Adorno echo similar concerns through different perspectives and rhetoric. But Tsuchiya comes to the conclusion that "the world that comes together when independent individuals can communicate with each other is pretty close to an exit" (Documentary Box). Perhaps the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, set against the backdrop of consumer Japan, had one foot in this exit, and the other foot in Adorno's mouth.

FOOTNOTE

1. As an experimental filmmaker in Japan, Ogawa Shinsuke (1935-1991) devoted his career to the cultivation of documentary style and production.

REFERENCES


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