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Takahiko Iimura – Early Conceptual Film and Video

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ABSTRACT

Andrzej Pitrus discusses works by Takahiko Iimura - one of the most important Japanese conceptual artist, author of numerous performances, films, and videos. The artist was influenced by Western tradition of avant-garde. Yet, in his early works many Japanese elements are present. Takahiko Iimura was always fascinated with communication, and possibilities of translations between languages and visual cultures. The author proposes several interpretations of selected works to expose the most innovative strategies used by Japanese pioneer of media art.

KEYWORDS: Japanese experimental film, conceptual art, media literacy, identity.

„From the beginning I liked writing about my filmmaking. My earliest writing goes back to the 1960s when I started filmmaking” (...) The reason of writing in those days was that no film critic had ever written about my films, and I had to write about the films I was going to show. It was a very practical reason to explain to an audience why (and how) those films were made. Also, I was sure that there was nobody who knew about my film work better than myself” (Iimura¹ 2007: 7)

With this statement Japanese experimental filmmaker and video artist Takahiko Iimura opens his long awaited English language collection of commentaries, screenplays, notes, and other writings. Strangely, Iimura's words remind me of Andy Warhol's opinion about his own works. He used to say that it was much more interesting to discuss his films than to actually watch them, no doubt especially if we consider extremely long works showing us the Empire State Building or a sleeping man. But Warhol was not only talking about boredom. His commentary also applied to a certain tendency of avant-garde cinema: conceptual film.

¹ The non-capital initial letter is going to be used throughout this paper in the artist's surname, according to the orthography he himself has introduced and used in the English versions of his name.

Conceptual art, and this includes its film version, can be defined in many ways. Yet, the Polish author Ryszard Kluszczyński offers a simple and precise way to understand this tendency. Kluszczyński (1999: 80) sees conceptual art as a construct which includes two basic elements: a concept and an artifact. If we are able to replace the artifact leaving the concept intact, then the work can be described as conceptual. Thus, artifacts are in some way not important: they only transmit concepts and ideas which hold the true meaning of a work.

Many conceptual artists also adopted strategies of minimalism. To express their ideas they reduced unimportant elements of the work to confront viewers with precisely formulated statements. This strategy was very often used in structural cinema, which can be defined as a movement focusing on the very basics of cinema. It explored the ontology of a film, the notions of space, time, movement and the viewer's position. P. Adams Sitney writes:

The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. Four characteristics of the structural film are its fixed camera position (fixed frame from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography of the screen. (Sitney 2002: 348)

He also confronts structural film with so called lyrical cinema:

The four techniques are the more obvious among many subtle changes from the lyrical film in an attempt to divorce the cinematic metaphor of consciousness from that of eyesight and body movement, or at least to diminish these categories from the predominance they have in Brakhage's films and theory. In Brakhage's art, perception is a special condition of vision, most often represented as an interruption of the retinal continuity (e.g., the white flashes of the early lyric films, the conclusion of *Dog Star Man*). In the structural cinema, however, apperceptive strategies come to the fore. It is cinema of the mind rather than the eye. (Sitney 2002: 348)

Some of the works by conceptual artists were quite radical. Yet, the most uncompromising is *Zen for Film* by Nam June Paik (1962). The Korean artist removed all unnecessary elements from his film leaving only the two that are crucial for a film as such to exist: time and space. His work is

a single reel (9 minutes running time) of an exposed film stock: the audience watches an “empty” frame with occasional aleatoric artifacts of dust and scratches.

Takahiko iimura is very often considered a part of the tradition of structural cinema (see: Linder 1976: 248), however we have to remember that his films cross the boundaries of individual creative strategies and include elements of lyrical cinema, and expanded cinema. Yet, early films and videos of this Japanese artist do reveal similarities to some works by American and European structuralists.

Takahiko iimura is no doubt one of the most important and influential experimental filmmakers in the World. His approach to filmmaking was certainly influenced by the masters of American avant-garde, but the Japanese director explores similar issues in a highly individual style, which has its roots in a different cultural tradition. The director explains it in one of his essays:

In Japan, “movie” is called *eiga* which literally means “reflected picture”. This indicates how the man who adapted the word into Japanese regarded movie originally. In English we say “motion picture” which literally means picture in motion. I prefer the word “*eiga*: reflected picture” to “motion picture”. It is because I am concerned in my films with “reflected cinema” rather than “motion pictures”.

“Reflected picture” emphasizes a state – not a motion – a state where a picture is reflected through light – not a picture which moves. In such a state, motion could be involved since it covers all situations including motion and non-motion: still. (iimura 2007: 39)

The idea of reflectiveness of the cinema relates not only to its ontology, but also – in the case of Takahiko imura – to its specific relationship with the works of Western artists. The Japanese filmmaker “reflects” their strategies and ideas in his own way. Sometimes he employs certain popular techniques (eg. so called “flicker film”) and gives them new meaning, sometimes he explores similar problems, but with his own techniques. In one of his works he literally names artists who influenced him the most. His *Filmmakers* (1968) is both an *hommage* to his American masters and an exercise in experimental filmmaking. In six parts of the work he portrays Stan Brakhage, Stan Vanderbeek, Jack

Smith, Jonas Mekas, Andy Warhol, and... Takahiko Iimura himself, and tries to borrow their visual style and techniques.

Takahiko Iimura is also aware that the “language” of a film depends heavily on the natural language of its maker. Hence he was very much interested in the theoretical explorations of Sergei Eisenstein who formulated his ideas about film editing inspired by the process of making meaning in Chinese characters.

The Japanese artist uses Chinese writing in a specific way. In *Kanji*, the visual elements are the same, but the structure of the language is different. Thus, the “language” of a filmmaker relies both on visuality and the specific position of a subject. The filmmaker explains this with a simple example:

“We say in Japanese *I You see* as far as the order of the word is concerned; in English we say *I see You*. The difference in the position of the object indicates the priority in communication: in Japanese, the object *you*; in English, the verb *see*. In Japanese the subject is linked to the object directly, whereas in English it is necessary to have a predicate in advance of the object. If we take the subject as *I*, as in the above sentence, it is in English that the ego must be set up at a distance from the object. This is in opposition to Japanese, where the syntagmatic contiguity of subject and object (unmediated as it were by the predicate) makes for the assumption of a pre-established ego. In English it is the subject that is most strongly emphasized, this is not so in Japanese.” (Iimura 2007: 121)

Takahiko Iimura is certainly an artist with roots in his own culture and language, yet he is also aware that his cinema borrows even more from American avant-garde, and contributes to it. We have to remember that many of his experiments were made in English. Yet the artist never emphasises simplified oppositions between East and West, trying to understand the ways in which linguistic and cultural competence influences his explorations of the deepest structures of cinema. This is why the problem of subjectivity in a context of structural features of film seems to be one of the most important topics of his works. It also explains why the artist is so interested in the process of transformation during which someone else's techniques and strategies are used in a new way. Consequently, he also explores the problem of understanding visual data.

Takahiko iimura is a very prolific artist. In the 1960s he started making his experimental films, and in the next decade became interested in a new medium: video. Later he created numerous installations, and even... video games: in 1993 he worked with Sony's texture mapping game technology in a project exploring differences between Eastern and Western concepts of space and time. (see: Cannon 2007: 38). Although his recent projects are also very interesting, it seems that it is the early works that explain his ideas in the most challenging way.

Takahiko iimura was “discovered” by Jonas Mekas – the artist who is not only one of the greatest experimental filmmakers of all time, but who also is considered to be the most important authority on avant-garde cinema. In 1963 he watched Takahiko iimura's *Love (Ai, 1962)* during the third edition of a festival of art house cinema in Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium. In 1966 he commented on this work in an article for *Film Culture*:

“I have seen a number of Japanese avant-garde films at the Brussels International Experimental Film Festival, at Cannes, and at other places. Of all those films, iimura's *Love* stands out in its beauty and originality, a film poem, with no usual pseudo-surrealist imagery. Closest comparison would be Brakhage's *Loving* or Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*. *Love* is a poetic and sensuous exploration of the body... fluid, direct, beautiful.”

(after: <http://www.takaiimura.com/work/Love.html>)

The film was also often compared to Willard Mass' *Geography of the Body*, as both of them used images of the human body in a series of extreme close-ups. Yet, the strategy of the Japanese artist is slightly different. Takahiko iimura shows an actual lovemaking scene to relate to Japanese censorship regulations which prohibit representations of sexual organs and functions. Images he created are both explicit and abstract, and they show two different yet corresponding structures: of a filmic image (grain of the film stock), and a sexual act. Although Jonas Mekas saw this film as an example of poetic cinema, it is at the same time an exploration of the problem of representation. The artist is interested in its two levels relating both to the ontology of the image itself, and its relationship with reality. Extreme close-ups were also used in *Face* (1963) – another film exploring “geographies” of a human body. The artist tries to discover a fine line between figurative representation and almost abstract signs. The process he visualizes directly relates to the

system of Japanese language and writing. Their meanings are created both on the level of visuality (originally many of the characters were “inspired” by the appearance of the objects they represented, eg. 男 which means “man”) and their structure (eg. 男女 which means “male” and consists of two individual characters meaning “man” and “sex” or “character” respectively).

Writing is also considered a form of art in Japan. Calligraphers are not only expected to communicate meaning, but also create beauty.² The Japanese director explores this feature of *Kanji* too. His *White Calligraphy* (1967) is a film composed entirely of representations of Japanese characters. Yet, in this case they are not painted but scratched directly into frames of a black film leader. The characters were taken from *Kojiki* – the first history of Japan compiled in the VIII century by Yasumaro no 5. The way they are presented to the audience makes them illegible. To “read” them, we have to slow the film down and risk its destruction by the heat of a projector bulb. Furthermore – even if the film was paused, and this can be easily done with today's technology, the viewer would not be able to understand their meanings properly, as their original form is different from contemporary *Kanji*.

There are several possible interpretations of this film. It certainly relates to the strategies of Stan Brakhage who not only reinvented non-camera filmmaking, but also “signed” his works by scratching his name into the final frames of his films. Takahiko Iimura also deconstructs the way Japanese writing is produced. Traditionally characters are tiny paintings made with special soft brushes; the director uses a more “violent” technique to create them. Finally, the characters appear on the screen only for a fraction of a second, and thus cannot be read. The director not only deprives them of their meaning, but also reformulates one of the most important creative strategies of Dada and Neo-Dada movements. Artists who belonged to them were very much interested in the degree to which everyday objects could be transformed into artworks. For example, their ready-mades demonstrated how commodities could lose their original function and instead gain meaning: an urinal became Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, and an iron with brass tacks attached to its soleplate became Man Ray's *Gift*. Here characters (objects and meanings at the same time) give up their initial features and become abstract lines and shapes. It is also important to note that *Kojiki* is one of the first examples of the use of

² While this problem cannot be examined here in detail, relationships between calligraphy and art were discussed by many authors. See for example Taylor and Taylor, 2014.

Chinese characters in Japan. Thus Takahiko iimura's piece also relates to the origins of Japanese language.

Takahiko iimura criticized Japanese censorship also in another film. *On Eye Rape* (1962) combines two strategies of an avant-garde film: flickering and found footage. In this short the artist used an educational film rescued from a rubbish bin. This animated production explained the process of procreation with the example of plants and animals. Takahiko iimura punched numerous holes in the stock, which both obscure “obscene” fragments of the original film and create a “flicker effect” inspired by Paul Sharits' experiments. *On Eye Rape* comments on specific censorship procedures only to be found in the artist's home country. Instead of removing entire inappropriate scenes, Japanese censors obscure the genital areas of the actors and actresses. Takahiko iimura amplifies this abusive practice: we can hardly see the original images. Instead our eyes are being “raped” by flickering light reflected on the screen.

Many early films by Takahiko iimura reveal his fascination with Russian avant-garde classic director Sergei Eisenstein. Both artists were very much interested in relationships between language and cinema. Eisenstein studied Chinese and Japanese writings and found lots of inspiration in them. The process of creating meaning in those languages inspired him to formulate his own ideas, including the concept of “vertical montage”, which produces meanings between various elements of the filmic structure. The concept was used to some extent by Takahiko iimura in his *Junk* (*Kuzu*, 1962). This short can be seen as an ecological film criticizing human exploration of a natural environment. The director filmed all kinds of junk he found on the beach in Tokyo Bay – heavily polluted in the early 1960s. Yet the intention of the artist was different: by filming trash and bodies of dead animals he wanted to revitalize them and transform them into objects of art. This strategy was directly inspired by the Dada and Neo Dada practice of assemblage. Yet, in this case, the objects are not directly incorporated into a work of art, but only represented on film. Instead, the director combines the images he collected with a noisy “junk” soundtrack, thus creating vertical correspondences between particular elements of the structure.

Takahiko iimura wanted to explore all possible structures of film. In *A Dance Party in the Kingdom of Lilliput* (1964) he filmed the absurdist activities of his friend – performer Sho Kazakura. Individual scenes labelled with letters A, B and C, were edited in two different orders.

Then the two films were screened side by side to show how “horizontal” structure could be manipulated.

The filmmaker was also excited by projection itself. For him, each screening was different, and was somewhat of a live act. He explored this aspect of cinema in his installations. Most of them were very minimalistic and usually employed more than one projecting device. The most famous was *Projection Piece* (1968-72) which was based on performative alternating structures created by three projectors: one with no film at all, the other with exposed “blank” film in it, and the third one running unexposed, black stock. Takahiko Iimura's installations utilized procedures close to minimalism: the artist wanted to explore the experience of projection itself, and hence rejected any form of figurative representation.

Many experimental artists of the 1960s were interested in performance and incorporated performative elements in their works. Takahiko Iimura was no exception. He not only collaborated with performers, but also organized live presentations of his cinematic installation, for example the *Talking Picture (The Structure of Film Viewing)* (1981) series in which audio commentary was performed live by the artist himself. The majority of these works were created in the 1980s, and for this reason they are not discussed here.

Like many other conceptualists, Takahiko Iimura was excited by technology. Thus, it was not a surprise that he started using video as soon as it became available. There are some thought-provoking pieces among his early works made in the new format. The earliest were also the simplest. This was because the Sony Portapak device, enthusiastically adopted by numerous artists all over the world, offered relatively low quality image (black and white, with resolution inferior to 16 mm film) and no editing tools, which became available to independent artists in the second part of the 1970s.

Many Americans explored features of the new medium in close connection to the question of perception. Electronic images were only seemingly successors of cinema and many of the artists noticed that there was a closer relationship between video and sound recording than between video and film. Bill Viola, who was one of the first to explore those affinities, writes:

Technologically, video has evolved out of sound (the electromagnetics) and its close association with cinema is

misleading since film and its grandparent, the photographic process, are members of a completely different branch of the genealogical tree (the mechanical/chemical). The video camera, as an electronic transducer of physical energy into electrical impulses, bears a closer original relation to the microphone than to the film camera (Viola 1995: 158-159)

Takahiko iimura's observations are similar. His first works explore not only images and sounds, but also deal with the electrical signal, and its transformation into visuals and audio. Minimalistic *Chair* (1970) is a "portrait" of a piece of furniture modulated by light and electronic sounds. *Blinking* (1970) can be described as a video "translation" of flicker film. The artist generates numerous interferences and distortions, which corrupt the image and produce effects similar to those of Sharits' filmic experiments.

Time Tunnel (1971) also seems quite important as it deals with possible overlapping of film and video. The director evokes the strategy of "refilming" often used in structural cinema. Yet, instead of a film camera, a video camera is used: we see numbers 10 to 1 from a film leader illuminated by the light of a monitor and distorted by an electronic camera all hooked up in a closed circuit television system.

Video was a breakthrough technology for many reasons and ease of operation was certainly one of them. The artists could also record sounds and images simultaneously. Yet, Takahiko iimura is aware of the complex relationships between audio and video. In his *Double Portrait* (1973) he reworks the idea of Rene Magritte expressed in his famous drawing *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1926). The artist himself and his wife Akiko identify themselves positively and negatively (eg. *I am Taka iimura, I am not Akiko iimura*), while the camera shows them from different angles asserting the representational nature of their screen presence.

The most interesting work of the 1970s is perhaps *Visual Logic (and Illogic)* (1977) in which the artist goes back to his explorations regarding understanding of film. The video consists of four parts: Identity Piece, Location Piece, Formula Piece and Picture Piece. Each of them discusses possible relationships between three simple elements: two plates with letters A and B, and one blank plate. The camera pans between them and the voiceover explains what happens on the screen. Sometimes identical actions can be described in a completely different form, when "translated" from "visual language" into English.

It is very likely that this short video in a way recapitulates all early guises of Takahiko Iimura: a poet, an intellectualist, a performer, a Japanese in New York. His works are above all about translations. The artist returns to this problem also in more recent works, which obviously demand to be discussed in a separate study.

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