

X-Treme Private Documentary: Michael Moore and Kazuo Hara

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN • CENTER FOR JAPANESE STUDIES PRESENTS

X-TREME PRIVATE DOCUMENTARY: KAZUO HARA + MICHAEL MOORE



X-Treme Private Documentary: Kazuo Hara + Michael Moore
Poster. SEIKO SEMONES

By Abé Mark Nornes

Several years ago, documentary filmmaker Kazuo Hara and I reunited over beers at a favorite spot in Tokyo. This was shortly after *Fahrenheit 9/11* had its Japanese release and the conversation inevitably turned to the topic of Michael Moore. The film had impressed both of us. Of course, Hara's experience of the early Bush years was quite different than mine; his reaction to 9/11, the wars, the election, and everything else in the film was that of an appalled and bemused spectator, while I basically felt dazed and abused. Soon, however, we were talking about Moore's approach to history, particularly the way he pivots the past around his own peculiar

point of view. It was in this context that Hara mentioned that he had heard through the grapevine that Moore admired his work.

This made perfect sense. Hara entered the documentary film scene through still photography and made a name for himself with a string of astounding films. His debut effort, *Sayonara CP*, features a man with cerebral palsy who shares the life challenges posed by his disease—everything from sex and marriage to dealing with the attitudes of healthy people to simply speaking in the first place. The film has no Japanese subtitles, so the audience is forced to meet him on his terms. It climaxes with the man's poetry reading, first in a crowded public square until a policeman shoos them away, and then he is left naked and in the middle of a street. Hara's second film is called *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974*. He and his girlfriend made this documentary about his ex-wife, a feminist who was determined to live a new and independent life. The two women share intimacies (and complaints) about their relationship to the director, who is operating the camera. This film culminates with the two women giving birth on their own, at home. Hara then made the infamous *Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, about the suppressed history of the horrible fighting in New Guinea at the end of World War II. The director followed a veteran trying to uncover the troubling circumstances surrounding the execution of several men in his unit. The veteran uses an interviewing style that is as unconventional as it is disconcerting. When his old war buddies and superior officers stonewall, the man lays guilt trips on them by having his wife pose as a relative of one of the dead men; when that doesn't work, the vet literally beats the truth out of them while Hara films without intervention. These are only his first few films (all of which have recently been released on DVD by Facets Video).

Even from these brief descriptions, it should be obvious why Michael Moore might be attracted to the work of Kazuo Hara. Both exemplify an approach to documentary based on the affective presence of the filmmaker. They insert themselves into the historical world to see what happens; both record how their interaction with the people before the camera reveals something that would otherwise never have happened or would have remained hidden. In this sense, both filmmakers have forged a personal documentary style that is firmly anchored in the subjectivity of the director, a kind of filmic essay. The 1970s were formative years for both filmmakers as well. However, the above descriptions also hint at how different the two artists are. How provocative it would be to tease these similarities and differences out through an actual encounter. With me at Michigan, we figured it was worth a try.

Back in Ann Arbor, I discussed the possibility with Mark West and Jane Ozanich of the U-M Center for Japanese Studies and they loved the idea. We contacted Michael Moore, and he immediately sent word that he would do anything for a chance to meet Kazuo Hara. He wasn't kidding. He accepted our invitation in the midst of editing *Sicko*, a stage in the filmmaking process that inevitably takes much longer than planned. In the end, apparently to the consternation of his staff, he squeezed in a visit to Ann Arbor in the hours between finishing sound editing at Skywalker Ranch and hopping on a plane to the Cannes Film Festival. We were all grateful, and I sense he was, too.

The two directors met on stage at the Michigan Theater, and the discussion was absolutely fascinating. It began with Moore describing his discovery of Hara's cinema:

I was two-thirds of the way through post-production for *Roger and Me*, editing the film just four blocks from the White House and five blocks from the Kennedy Center. They were playing a film that night called *Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. I thought that was such a bizarre title for a film. Not that I had an interest in naked armies or anything—I just really wanted to get out of the editing room. So I walked over there and sat down and I was riveted for two hours. First, as a lover of movies, but it was also like I had this soul brother in Japan. I don't know if I'd say he was doing a similar thing, but certainly using this documentary art form in a way that was very different from Discovery Channel-type fare. I remember walking back that night: I was inspired, I was exhilarated. I had never seen anything like this. I had *truly* never seen this...I mean it's lonely out there being a regular feature on Fox News and anytime I could be made to feel like the conservative one, I'd take it...Hara was grappling with how to do a documentary in an unconventional way that didn't numb people...To have a kindred spirit, to have someone who has inspired me very early on, and did that completely unbeknownst to himself. I felt after watching

that film that I had permission—I gave myself permission—to make *Roger and Me* the way I was making it.

From here, Hara and Moore covered a lot of ground, sharing their thoughts about filmmaking and each other's work. As we suspected, both the differences and similarities gradually came into focus. Hara has quite a unique perspective on nonfiction film, and it was thought-provoking to hear Michael Moore talk about his (political) art as opposed to simply politics. The following is a particularly revealing exchange:

HARA¹: For any filmmaker, on top of money, you need a certain energy that sustains you through the arduous process of making a film. I've read in various interviews and books by you that it is the anger you have that is often what sustains you. But I believe you need something underneath that. In my case, my sustenance is my own question mark about myself. There is the unknown within me that would lead me somewhere that I don't know and I'm perhaps afraid of that. But I do have a very strong desire to find out what that is, and when I make a documentary film I am not doing it for social justice, or organizing the masses, expounding some theme, or anything except finding out that question mark within me. Therefore, although I am shooting my subjects with my camera, I am also carrying the camera toward the inside of myself, and going further and deeper within. Do you do anything like that?

MOORE: I actually disagree with you in terms of the anger. I worry that my anger is actually disruptive to myself, to me personally. You said that the anger sustains me, but I think it's really my optimistic, hopeful belief that people are good to the core. And to keep one's sense of humor in dark times is a very important thing to do. To keep your soul from collapsing from the anger and the despair that exists...as a filmmaker, I set out to make these films, first and foremost, to express myself artistically and I always put the art before the politics. Because if you put politics first you end up, at least in film, with a pretty crappy movie that nobody wants to see.

As this short dialogue suggests, the audience at the Michigan Theater witnessed two of the world's best documentary filmmakers trying to figure each other out. Part of that

process clearly involved comparing what they thought about the other with what they thought about themselves. It seemed they felt like kindred spirits because of their inclination to interfere with the reality before the camera, and also from their formative experiences in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. However, this latter historical simultaneity was more likely a point of departure, as the situations in Japan and America differed in some very fundamental ways.

Moore essentially picked up on the political spirit of the era and forged ahead with a cinematic path that paired the first person point of view with his now signature use of humor and irony. In contrast, Hara began making films when the student movement devolved into shocking violence and feelings of despair and failure. This helps explain why he prefers not to see himself connected to social movements, even while making profoundly political films.

This difference was palpable when an audience member asked about the representation of bodies in documentary, an interesting question considering Hara's innovative films about cerebral palsy, sex, and war, and Moore's new film on the health care crisis. Moore prefaced his answer with a joke—“*Sicko* has the first nudity I have

ever put in a film, and I just got my rating back from the ratings board and it's my first PG-13. And it's male nudity, too!”—but then struggled to answer the question. He seemed much more comfortable discussing the challenges of creatively rendering recent history, politics, and the struggles of everyday life. On the other hand, Hara used the question to think about his relationship to Moore, stating:

This gets to the major difference, as I see it, between Michael's works and mine. What I try to do in documentary films is really work towards the emotions of the people in the audience, to energize them. Michael does this through his words and I think I do it through bodies. I like to leave people in the audience aching and itching in their desire to do something with their bodies after seeing my films. I would like to kidnap their bodies in that way.

On this note, both directors left the stage and the spectators' bodies were then “kidnapped” in a screening of *Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. I was certainly not the only person who felt like the conversation was just beginning.

I write this in Tokyo, where I just met Hara for dinner near the spot where this event was first imagined. He was still glowing from his trip to Ann Arbor. He found the evening with Moore extremely exciting, but also far too short. I sensed a hint of jealousy that he had to share it with an audience. Aside from the inevitable mediation of translation, there was the need to cater to an audience that came for both enlightenment and entertainment. When they parted, Moore told the Japanese director he was planning to bring *Sicko* to Japan this summer and hoped to pick up where they had left off. Hara is surely waiting with a list of new questions.

Abé Mark Nornes is Associate Professor of Screen Arts and Cultures and of Asian Languages and Cultures. He is currently working on *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*, forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press. Professor Nornes has also been a coordinator for the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival since 1990.

1. All Hara quotations in A. M. Nornes translation.



Clockwise from top left: Image from *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. TIDEPOINT PICTURES. Kazuo Hara explains his work during the on-stage discussion. MARTIN VLOET/U-M PHOTO SERVICES. Image from *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974*. TIDEPOINT PICTURES. Michael Moore with CJS Director, Mark West, at the on-stage discussion. MARTIN VLOET/U-M PHOTO SERVICES.