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# Documentarists of Japan, No. 2: An Interview with Hara Kazuo

Aaron Gerow

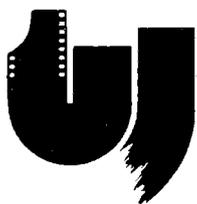
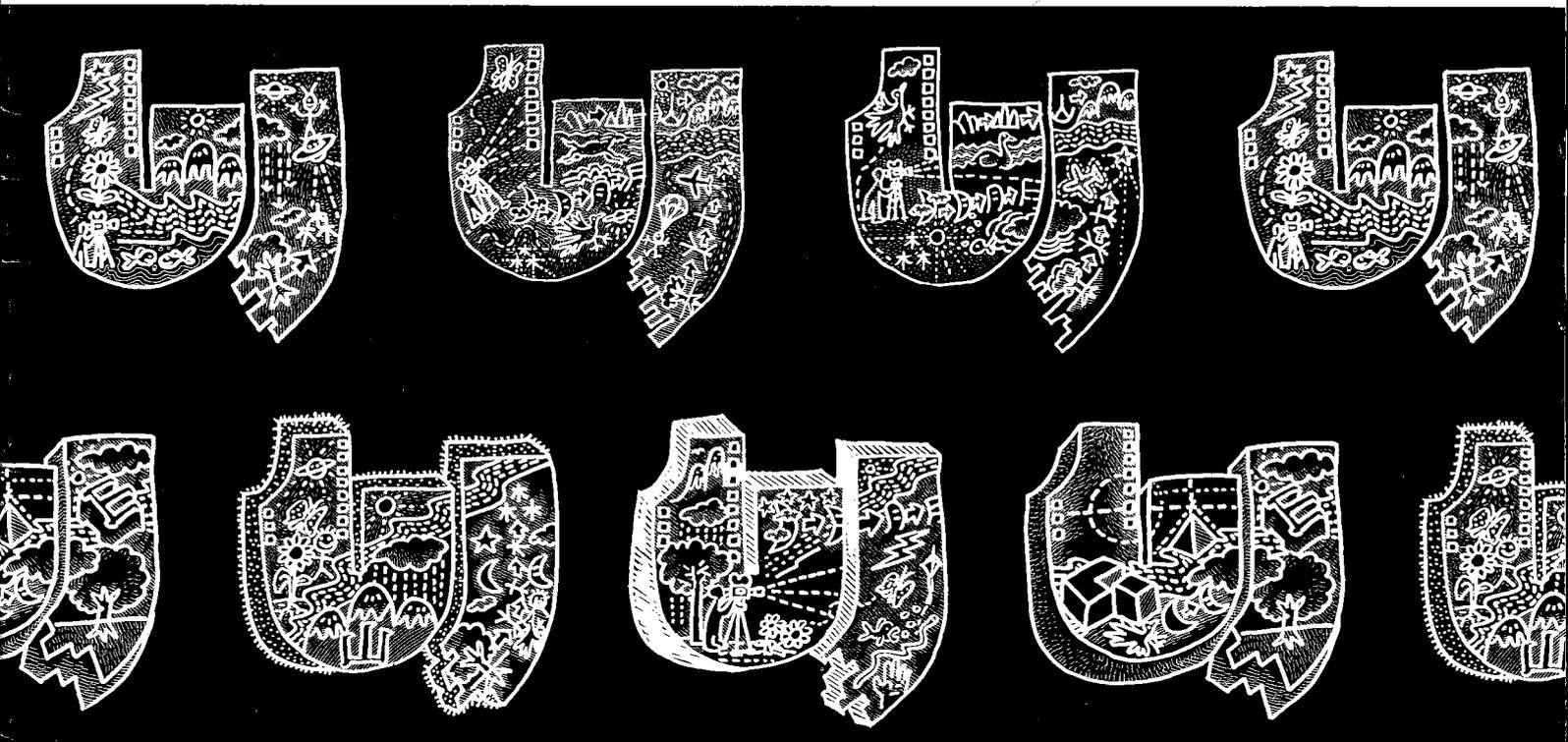


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# Documentary Box

Vol. III



山形国際ドキュメンタリー映画祭'93  
YAMAGATA International Documentary Film Festival '93

# Documentarists of Japan (Second in a Series)

## *An Interview with Hara Kazuo*



The subject of the third "Documentarists of Japan" feature is the filmmaker Hara Kazuo. His celebrated work *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (1987) took the interrogation of the postwar Emperor system to a new level of intensity, and was a big hit in Japan and abroad. But his work also raises fundamental questions about the role of fiction in documentary, the legacy of the 1970's, and putting oneself on the line for one's films.

— Interviewed by A. A. Jerow

—How did you become interested in filmmaking?

—I've liked movies ever since I was a child. In my time, lower and middle school students were prohibited from seeing movies, but we liked them so much we often secretly went and saw them anyway. When I was 20, I came to Tokyo to try to become a photographer and studied photojournalism by myself for five years. I met my wife [Kobayashi Sachiko] when she came to see an individual exhibition of my work in the Ginza. She had come to Tokyo to study screenwriting. I got to know her and talked with her about various things and before you know it, she asked for my help in making a film. A cooperative project, you see. Essentially, that's how I got into filmmaking, the film we discussed making being my first film.

—*Goodbye CP?* [Hara's 1972 documentary about victims of cerebral palsy].

—That's right. I made one film, then felt I might as well make another, and so on. In that way, before I knew it, I had become a filmmaker. It's not like I studied film at some college.

—Were there any films or filmmakers you particularly liked?

—There weren't any films that so impressed me they changed my life, though I do have favorite movies and directors. As a human being, I think much of Urayama Kirio, who I've worked with as an assistant director. I also like Imamura Shohei, of course, and I love Kurosawa's films. As for foreign films, I like American B-movies more than European cinema: action films, westerns.

—People often call your films "action documentaries."

—Yes, there's probably some influence there.

—How do you cooperate with your wife in making your films?

—In the credits, I'm the director and cameraman and she's the producer, but fundamentally, we always discuss the film while making it. [Hara looks at his wife across the table]. Therefore, we make the films together. I hold the camera, so in that sense, I'm in charge of the technical end, but in terms of the content, we always confer between ourselves while making the film.

—One film critic has described your films as focusing on unusual people, the, how should I say, "aliens" living in society.

—Hmm, "aliens." It has to do with the 1970 anti-U.S.-Japan Security Treaty demonstrations. I didn't participate in the student or worker movements, but when everyone rose up on the streets of Shinjuku... At that time, it was like that all over the world. Everyone trembled with the sense that something big was going to happen. There was the desire to ask how to express something, to say what the world is — in my case I did it in film, through documentaries. I wondered whether it wasn't possible to express in cinema that way of feeling, that 1970's sensibility. There are different ways of perceiving the 70's depending on the person, but I think in the 1970's, in Japan as well as elsewhere, people raised a lot of questions about the current social system. How could one punch some holes in this monolithic social system? There is the idea that to open some holes you need a hero or heroine, though not necessarily like the ones in American action films. In my case, I wondered if we couldn't find heroes and heroines standing out among ourselves. It seemed to me that more than through an organization, couldn't an individual somehow strike out on his own, in his own field in his own way? And when an individual stands out, isn't that just another way of saying "alien"? I feel it's the people termed "aliens" by society that have more of the qualifications to stand out, so they're the ones my interest turns to. I guess that's it. It's a long explanation, but at last I've come to some conclusion [laughs].

—I'd like to ask you about your most recent work, *Yellow Cabs*, which I saw on television. While I liked the way it revealed your consistent concern for the "alien" figures in society, it also deviated from your other films in the use of TV-style narration and

other devices.

—Speaking of narration, there's a saying in television that if there is no narration, the viewers won't understand. Since that's also what the network producer said, that's the biggest reason we had to do the narration.

But about *Yellow Cabs*, the two of us have been attracted most to the ambitious part of people. That's the case with Okuzaki [the sometimes violent former soldier who pursued the truth of Japan's war responsibility in Hara's 1987 documentary, *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*]. In fact, all my heroes want to do something about society or other people, and have a dream powerfully connected to society, the world, or other people. In *Yellow Cabs*, though some of the women did fantasize about America, it was always a personal dream. The people we have filmed so far may have had a personal vision about what they wanted to do, but it was always related to a desire to fundamentally change society. The dreams of the women in *Yellow Cabs*,



Goodbye CP

however, were only personal, devoid of the inspiration to change Japan from the bottom up. While it's OK to persevere in one's personal space, there's a limit to how much we can relate to a dream restricted to the frame of the personal. Up to a certain point, all you can say is, "more power to you." Since the people we have treated so far have always had society behind them, we are asked what we really think, involving us and spreading the issue.

With *Yellow Cabs*, you can't get that involved (laughs). Faced with a man and woman who like or hate each other, we can only sympathize with them and ask them to do their best. I realized that halfway through. Before I started filming, I expected to discover something in the surroundings of these women living in America, but once I got rolling, I couldn't find anything that broadened the issue. While I'm not disapproving of the personal interest that's involved in wanting to do something, or in liking a man, it's just

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\* *Yellow Cab* is a derogatory Japanese slang word used to refer to Japanese women who are easily "picked up" by foreigners, especially black men. The term was popularized by the journalist Ieda Soko in her book of the same name. Hara's film, a documentary tracing the lives of several women with black lovers and husbands, was aired in January, 1993.

not the kind of subject I tend to treat. That may be the reason you sensed it wasn't a characteristic work.

—What do you think of making documentaries for television? You can say it does bring in some income ...

—That's a hard question. While I do want the money, the chance to do an unknown world is also interesting in its own way. Since I didn't know much about the women called "yellow cabs," in that sense it was intriguing to follow these women around for half a year. In addition, I had no consciousness about black people. You can say "blacks," but there are African Americans, blacks born in America, and blacks born in Latin America. Depending on their birthplace, their culture and way of thinking are different. I liked finding out about that.

To talk about whether TV is good or bad, the fact is that there's very little freedom in Japanese television.

The freedom of the filmmaker, that is. I sense that doing work in such conditions doesn't suit me. But I'm not the type who tries to unreasonably enforce his own way of doing things within a given structure. For instance, since I am concerned it would cause the production company problems if it ends up they couldn't deliver the film to the network, I'm the kind

who'll put in the narration if the network orders us to. I think it's best not to work the system in a bad way. After all, when I make my own films, I can always express my own conceits to this person [pointing to his wife], because she lets me do what I want [laughs].

—Did living in America for a year affect you as a Japanese filmmaker?

—I kept going back and forth between Japan and the U.S., so it's not as if I was there for a full 365 days. I don't at all have the sense that I was ever deeply involved in America. Yet the reason I liked the U.S. is that, for better or for worse, human self-assertion has developed there into a stronger form than in Japan. In the end I liked the fact I could see more clearly what human beings can be.

This is distinct from the level of my personal taste, but Urayama Kirio once told me you can't ignore the U.S. in contemplating the future world. He said the reason is that America is an artificially constructed country, a kind of large experimental lab where different peoples were made into a single nation — a test by trial-and-error that is continuing even today. When

thinking about how humanity is going to live from now on, looking at the American example and thinking of the meaning of the U.S. can be very instructive. One can't ignore the U.S. I'm then interested in America in the sense Urayama describes it. So, more than being influenced, I just had this curiosity and went to the U.S. Since there's no way to understand what Urayama described in only a year, I want to keep involved with the U.S. for the next 10 or 20 years so as to continue my homework on this problem.

So, I can't really say there was any concrete influence. Yet of all the foreign countries I've been to, I feel that the atmosphere of America and New York best fits my disposition.

—I wonder if you could next tell us about the film you're currently making. Is it nearly completed?

—I'm making a film on Inoue Mitsuharu, but it's not scheduled to be done until this fall.

—What made you interested in Inoue's life and character?

—It was the same with Okuzaki, but when I first met Inoue, thinking he was interesting, I immediately considered filming him. Thinking that, the question then was what kind of film to make. With Inoue, I went to see his lectures and they were excellent. Inoue is a person who uses agitation well, who can

really speak with persuasive power. Since I found him fascinating, at that moment I thought of making a film. Then I began pondering what kind of film to make. Even after making the film for 5 years, I still don't know what kind of film it will be.

Inoue is a novelist who often takes up in his works the theme of the relationship between fiction and reality. We also make documentaries where the connection between reality and fiction is an unavoidable problem, so we wanted him to show us how he, Inoue Mitsuharu, as an individual and an author, dealt with that relationship in his life and his work. But that was very difficult and halfway through, I realized the film was pretty bad [laughs]. The fact is that since Inoue is a novelist, he doesn't do action. I always want my subjects to be active, and Okuzaki always complied. At one point, Inoue told me, "I'm different than Okuzaki," meaning that he didn't do action, I guess. With each film I make, I do feel I have to change the style and technique, but my previous techniques still remain within my body. I think Inoue sensed that. So when he told me, "Even if you think that I'm the same



Okuzaki in *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*

as Okuzaki, I'm not," I really had to find an entirely new film style. But someone like me who likes action can't change easily. When no one shows me any action, I really become frustrated.

When I began filming, Inoue was diagnosed as having cancer and underwent an operation. The operation was a success, but only in the sense that if the initial cancer was well-treated, there was a fifty-fifty chance it wouldn't reoccur. Inoue, however, acted incredibly healthy, so I thought that everything was OK and that I could easily persist in this for another 10 years. But the disease progressed before we knew it. In the end, what we filmed while Inoue was still alive was just the progression of that disease. He got more and more sick and then died. Given that in reality we filmed only the development of Inoue's illness, the question was how we could complete the film we had initially set out to make? Our style tries to transform into the power of cinema the tension that arises from an ardent feud between us and the flesh and blood subject. But when that living body suddenly disappears, how can you fight with that non-existent body? For me, that's a terrible problem. Frankly, I'm still experimenting with solutions.

When I did some thorough research on Inoue, I started squeezing out why it was Inoue as a person was so fixated on fiction. I began to realize that Inoue himself, his very way of living, was full of fictional elements. I didn't know it at first; I learned it only after doing some research. The story from when Inoue became an author and started publishing his work is not that inaccurate, but the history of his youth from his birth is mostly fiction. In other words, he made it up, from his birth to his upbringing. Fascinating, isn't it? I learned this after he died. If you ask why I couldn't find it out while he was still alive, it's because he himself stopped me from investigating when he was still around. That's why I didn't know. When he died, the minute I started to do a little research, I found out that the man himself concocted his life as a fiction when writing up his own chronology. I'm now at the stage of searching out why he himself would create a fiction in this way.

It would have been interesting to do this while the man was still alive, but with Inoue himself firmly holding the lid on the subject, I couldn't move. That's why I'm doing it now, after he's dead. I don't know

whether or not I can skillfully transform this interest into the power of documentary cinema, but it's certain that this is a film that demands I change the style I've used until now. I won't know if it works out or not if I don't give it a try.

—In *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, Okuzaki also fictionalized his own life and the world around him. In some sense, he was a good theater director. So even if Inoue was not an action hero, the theme of his mixing fiction and non-fiction is not too different from your previous films.

—In that sense there are similarities. While I did have a vague premonition that in making a film on Inoue I would be problematizing fiction, it wasn't a definite plan because I didn't yet have the feeling that Inoue's life itself was fully fictional. As you say, my films do consistently depict the relationship between fiction and reality, but this film is just talk, talk, talk.

My first documentary, *Good-bye CP*, had very little talk. *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974* [Hara's 1974 film about his ex-wife Takeda Miyuki] had a bit more, and with Okuzaki, it really increased. This time there's even more talk. Sometime I want to make a documentary with no words whatsoever. Words, words, words. You can't trust words.

—Why can't you trust

them?

—Well, you can't really tell the truth with words, to put it simply. Aren't there times when, for instance, you express the feeling you hate someone using the words "I like you"?

With Inoue, since he's a novelist, he says wonderful things when he talks to people. I really like that. But there's always a reverse side to people. Only when you see both sides of a person do you really get a look at the existence of one human being, and, at the same time, the social system that supports such a person. Thus in this case, the current Japanese system should come to the surface through a person like Inoue. It's too difficult if you only rely on words. Nothing comes to light. One reason I'm particular to action is that it is through action that one can see that reverse side. In this film, without action, you can't see beyond the surface. That's why I'm investigating the periphery, what surrounds Inoue.

—To return to the problem of reality and fiction, you know that there was recently the big uproar over a faked NHK documentary, an incident that raised in



*Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974*

many people's minds the problems of not only what documentary is, but what kind of reality it is that appears in documentaries. One of the interesting aspects of your films is how they treat the fiction and reality of objects. But from the point of view of faking reality, one can sense something bordering on the dangerous in blurring those boundaries.

—When we use the word "yarase (fake)," it usually carries a negative connotation. Japanese seem to be utterly opposed to filmmakers creating reality through the use of images. They have this conception that reality is always reality, that you can't fool around with it because it's a kind of sacred space you shouldn't violate. Documentarists in the U.S. and other countries don't seem to have this conception, do they? — Well, maybe they do. It's become a problem in American television as well.

But when there's a camera there, the situation does change. It's impossible to capture the natural human figure as long as a camera is present. Well, as long as you don't hide the camera. I think when you look at it, every film is a fake. Because of that, I think it's making a big fuss, the yelling of "yarase, yarase": that really is what seems confused. The Japanese obsession with cleanliness comes out and it disturbs me.

Instead of that, what the two of us always want to do, or what seems interesting to us, is not to ask if the society we live in is correct or not, but rather to clarify that humanity's essential way of doing things may be mistaken. We make films to that end. So really our tactic in making a film that reveals what the world is is to reverse assumptions about fiction and reality and argue that it is the given system itself, this present society, is it itself fully fictional? I basically think it's really the side that criticizes the problem of faking that is more open to suspicion. I'm not then saying that what NHK did is correct. Somebody already said this, but if they had just said they made it that way, it would have been OK. It was hiding the fact that created the problem; it was the hiding of the fact that was questionable.

What we did with Okuzaki is we revealed all the things he did. I'm not saying that what he did was all correct. But when he reached that stage he had to do those things, I too braced myself and said, "Let's do it." I tried to head in the direction of making others understand what has been done, revealing at the same time not only the new reality, but how we got to see that reality, everything: the process and the results. What should be criticized will be criticized, but this is what it is to make a documentary, I think.

—One of the features of your documentaries is that all the characters are aware of the camera. You once wrote that you love the camera, but could you

say some more about your relationship with the camera, and the camera's relation to the subject?

—Someone once said that among film directors there are two types: the ones who want to appear in front of the camera and the directors who really think they want to remain behind the camera. I wonder if I'm not basically the kind that wants to appear in front of the camera. Since I personally operate the camera, however, there's no way I can appear in front of it. If there was a separate cameraman, I think I'd certainly have the style where I often intrude in front of the camera, but there isn't one. It's not that I'm stuck behind the camera and there's no other way of thinking about it, but I do have the strong sense that "I am the camera." Like: "I am Cinema."

—A bit like Dziga Vertov.

—Yes. I love his films. I saw Dziga Vertov for the first time last year at the New York Museum of Modern Art and was very impressed. I felt I was doing the same things — though of course he did it much better. I do have an extremely strong desire to assert myself: the "I" in myself. To put it another way, I have a strong complex about myself, a kind of inside/outside relationship.

The idea of the camera as a weapon came out in the 60's, and with me, I am conscious that the camera, or at least holding the camera, can be, as I said before, one weapon used to break open a social system. This isn't the way Karatani Kojin explained it, but in the system in which I am a camera in this way, becoming a weapon, when I contend with society, what arises are various gaps; what becomes visible are the frictions in human relations or the system. Of course, these gaps are not outside of myself, but return into myself. So the values I hold begin to waver, and it is the sensations that arise, different from my own feelings of hating the scene or thinking it went well, that are themselves very interesting. What is most "me," then, is fixing these sensations I find interesting into film. So by feuding with the subject in this manner, rather than connecting with it, the power of the subject returns to me, and it is the conflicts that occur within me at that moment that are the most fascinating, the most interesting part of filming.

Thus in filming a woman named Takeda Miyuki, or a man named Okuzaki, or in this case filming Inoue, there's always the consciousness that the subject of this film is not Okuzaki or whoever; it's me. It's always there in excess. With each film, these reverberating feelings of mine gradually come to a boil at least once. For instance, during *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, Okuzaki said many things to me: "You're an idiot," "You're hopeless," or "You're too young for this. Go home, kid." So I was shooting a film while he

was saying all these things to me, and I had these doubts about what I should do. These contradictions and conflicts slowly built up within me, and then there's always one scene in each film where they burst forth. While holding the camera, I think, "This is it." I really want that one moment. It's the instant of pure ecstasy, when in making a film I think, "Movies are great." I make films because I want such moments.

—I think that's one of the interesting aspects of your work. The camera has profound power as a weapon; its gaze is truly imposing. But that itself can be problematic. For instance, there's the criticism that *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* treats the families of the former servicemen cruelly.

Yet it seems that in your films there's always one point where the subject rebels against the camera. Not only against the camera, but against you as well. I find that impressive. One could say then that all your films involve some kind of self-criticism.

—It's just as you say. That's one reason *Yellow Cabs* wasn't very interesting. I couldn't really find that power returning from the subject.

—With *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* being called a film that sometimes "bullies" its subjects, there is the problem of the ethics of documentary practice. For example, in your case is there something you would never film?

—You talk about bullying the ex-soldiers in *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, but the issue of them protecting their silence was not simply a question of their personal morals, it was the problem of the morals of the Japanese society that these people were keeping alive. Their silence was, in other words, nothing but the Japanese social system itself. Since I live in the same world as those people, the morals they hold are also in some ways my own. Thus when I choose to quarrel with these morals, and when these men become defensive, I attack. Okuzaki uses violence and I use the camera. It's certain that in appearance we are bullying these people. Yes, that's true. But while I understand that, I also think there are times that's all one can do. I feel in the end it's not really attacking an individual. On the surface we are assaulting another person, but what I want you to understand is that what we are choosing to problematize is not an individual issue, it is the morals these people hold: their ideas, their value system. That what I want to

punch holes in.

The point of view I'm expressing is a 1970's way of thinking. It's one of the things I picked up from the 70's, this set of values. We really put our bodies at risk when making our documentaries, so that's why people from the 70's tend to support our films. Those who criticize the 1970's surely hate that aspect of our work.

You can say the same thing happened in *Goodbye CP* in the relationship between the subject and my camera. In continuing to film the subject, there came a point when his wife told him she was going to divorce him because of us. He then took up a defensive posture, so that's why we began pushing him, asking him why. When it came to Takeda Miyuki, it was the

other side that attacked me, because it was I, more than her, who more often became defensive. She then tended to attack in such cases. There is the "sadistic/masochistic relationship" that Karatani talks about. But my character is neither masochistic nor sadistic [laughs]. Rather, in relating to someone, if they pull back, I attack; if they attack, I have to quickly withdraw.



*The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*

It's that kind of conflict. With Okuzaki, it was the kind of relation where he relentlessly attacked and I tried to hold my ground, but couldn't. The reason that in one film there's a sense of sadism one moment and then masochism the next is because of the subtle balance in this relationship. I think what's important in the end is whether I'm strong enough to attack the other or whether the other is the strong one and I get pushed back. When the other is weaker, then, you can't help feeling it's a bit cruel, I guess.

—A technical question. I found the editing of *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* superlative. How do you approach the editing of your films?

—I also think it's very good. The two of us edited *Goodbye CP* and *Extreme Private Eros* ourselves. But with *Emperor's Naked Army*, we thought it was too much for us, so we asked Mr. Nabeshima to do it. He's very skilled and took a year to edit the film. But Nabeshima is a fiction film editor, so if, to some, *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* seems enough like a dramatic film that one can question if it's really a documentary, that quality is really due to him. One problem that arose with Mr. Nabeshima editing the film is that when we were filming, we shot the entire process of going in and picking a fight — the entire scene — which made our existence behind the camera

quite apparent in the film. But being a fiction film editor, Mr. Nabeshima cut all that out. By our tastes, however, we actually prefer that element. It seems fiction film people somehow hate that kind of stuff. At the editing stage we thoroughly discussed this, but with trying to keep the film to two hours, that part was gradually cut out. In the end, that's how the film turned out.

—In your mind, what then is documentary film?

—It takes us 3 or 5 years to make one film. Taking those 3 to 5 years, I try to put out a performance, a condensed version of my living process. Saying, "Hey, this is the way I live." Okuzaki in the film said, "I fight against the postwar emperor system. This is the way I live. How do you live your life?" I think I can say the same thing: "I live this way, what about you?" That's our kind of cinema. We have this way of living, we spent our time with the subject in this way. What about you? Again I'm saying the same thing, but this way of posing the problem is typical of the 1970's. Maybe that's why I always want to express through film the way of feeling, the sensibility of the 1970's. So more than a theory of documentary or of film itself, I feel we put forward the problem of living. Inoue often said during filming that "writing is just how you live." You put down in writing how you have lived your own life. As Inoue is a writer, he uses literature. The two of us lived through the 70's and we took in a lot. Since then, 20 years have passed but we still live in the same way. We can only make films in this manner. This is our kind of writing, the way our life has turned out.

—As a Japanese documentary filmmaker, how would you place yourself in the history of Japanese documentary?

—[Laughs]. How indeed! I keep on repeating, "1970's," "1970's," but when you ask if those who made films in the 1950's and 60's had a completely different way of thinking, surprisingly that's not the case. You had Ogawa and Tsuchimoto in the generation before us, but I think they would certainly say the same things I've been saying. It's a bit extreme way of putting it, but there's an idea among Japanese that you make a film communally by living with the people who appear in front of the camera for 10 or 20 years, eating food out of the same pot. Ogawa Productions is the most conspicuous case of that, but I think even the two of us do that as well. The American way of making films is rooted in critique. It's not that we also didn't criticize Okuzaki, but sympathy takes precedence over critique. It may be a sympathy that includes antipathy, but there is the sense that we've kept company together. This may be one kind of

tradition in Japanese documentary or in the Japanese people themselves. But, to speak of what my position is in Japanese documentary history, well, I haven't really thought about it. However, as I've been obstinately insisting, fixated on the concept of the 1970's, maybe you can say that we are the filmmakers from the 1970's.

—As one last question, since you like dramatic action films, do you have any plans to make a fictional film?

—Yes. I'm thinking about making one next year. I can't summarize it in a few words, but I'd like to make this kind of film. We're still in the process of writing the script, but it's about a woman and the four men involved with her. In the end she's murdered, but when the men look at her, each man sees that one woman in a different way. We'll try having different actresses play that one woman. The scenario we're still working on is based on the idea that you could express something through how a multi-sided woman is seen by different men. I guess I'm most interested in stories about men and women. What a man is, what a woman is, parents and children—trying to catch the most important human relationships: for example, the relationship between fiction and reality, or with Okuzaki, the social theme of opposition to war. I want to get close to these fundamental relationships and ways of perceiving problems. I wonder what kind of film this idea will turn into, but I won't find out unless I try making it [laughs].

(Interviewed on April 30, 1993)

END NOTE: We are pleased to announce that, after this interview had been conducted, Mr. Hara was selected as a juror for the '93 YIDFF.

## PROFILE

Hara Kazuo was born in 1945, in Japan's Yamaguchi Prefecture. After attending the Tokyo School of Photography, he began work with Kobayashi Sachiko and established Shisso Productions in 1971. He has directed and filmed *Goodbye CP* (1972) and *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974* (1974), and worked as an assistant cameraman and assistant director on many other films, such as *Vengeance Is Mine* (1979 / Directed by Imamura Shōhei). In 1987, his *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* won the Japanese Film Director's Association Newcomer's Prize as well as the Berlin Film Festival's Caligali Film Prize. He is currently producing a documentary about Inoue Mitsuharu, to be completed this fall.