

“Cinema on Stage Performances” and Criticisms of Media

Akasaka Daisuke (Film Critic)

Numerous films feature theatre plays, raising the question: “What are fiction films?” One established film technique, which sets a play within a film, involves an actor facing the camera and saying: “this is a play.” Distinguished filmmakers prevent the audiences’ emotions from being easily manipulated, allowing the viewers to hesitate by creating some distance between the viewers and the film, thus giving them the mental space to doubt. This year, in the competition section of Yamagata Film Festival, Ignacio Aguero’s documentary, *The Other Day*, will be showcased. Ignacio appeared in Raoul Ruiz’s experimental documentary *La Présence réelle* (1983), one of Raoul’s later works, which at first documents the Avignon Theatre Festival from the viewpoint of an actor. At the end of the film, viewers do not know whether what is being presented on the screen comes from a theatre performance, footage of a play displayed in the background, or backstage footage. It is also unclear whether the play is part of the film or programmed by the theatre festival. During Salvador Allende’s rule, Ruiz worked for Chile’s state film agency. Shortly after Allende was overthrown by

the military coup d’état led by Pinochet, Ruiz was exiled from the country. Having experienced state controlled media, Ruiz was conscious of how the state authority manipulates the public with propaganda and questions the very nature of media, in this case theatre.

I once described the post-Portuguese Revolution films of Portuguese filmmakers Manoel de Oliveira, António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro — they were all documentarists as well — as being “Cinema on Stage Performances” (cf. Akasaka Daisuke, “Oliveira and the new century’s fiction films,” in *Manoel de Oliveira and the Contemporary Portuguese Films*, E/M books, 2003). It is highly likely that during that period, under the strict censorship of the dictatorship, in order to freely express themselves with images and sounds, Portuguese filmmakers had to emphasize the aspect of “theatre” in their films, and describe their films as theatre productions recorded on camera.

From the late 1950s to the 1960s, when mainstream media was already making a transition to television, it can be said that there was a global demand for “Cinema on Stage Performances” (*ibid.*). While

mainstream media had the tendency of focusing heavily on information, these films featuring stage performances highlighted the time and space of actors and musicians during their production efforts. Even if the films were fiction, they documented the labour of these artists and musicians. Mainstream media at the time often failed to document these important aspects of life. In the following films, *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1967), by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and *Ein Arbeiterclub in Sheffield* (1965), a documentary by Peter Nestler, we see the musicians’ production efforts leading up to performances or what we can call “backstage scenes.” Other similar examples are Johan van der Keuken’s film *Iconoclasm — A Storm of Images* (1982), and Frans van de Staak’s film *From the Work of Baruch d’Espinoza 1632–1677* (1973). In the former, youths undergo training in music and theatre; in the latter, the talented Dutch filmmaker creates a documentary about the work of youths reciting Spinoza, which captures the true nature of their performances whether they were poor or good. Nowadays, when almost anyone can access the media, the value of these older works is increasing, and needless to say, the best way to spread awareness of these films will be through education of visual literacy.

(Translated by Umewaka Soraya)