

A time consciousness of young Japanese media artists --- "MA" and the moving image of ITO Akihito's code of the river ---

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the work of a young Japanese media artist, ITO Akihito's code of the river, in order to introduce a relationship between the time consciousness based on the moving image and Japanese traditional time consciousness in the new media age.

Introduction

MEDIASELECT2003 was a project organized by a young scholar and a number of media artists who had participated in ISEA2002 NAGOYA [Orai]. Held between November 21-25 2003 at the Warehouse, the same place ISEA2002, the project comprised an exhibition and discussion about media art. I participated in this project, engaging in discussion with young Japanese media artists. I wanted to know how the technologies of moving image and new media affect a Japanese traditional consciousness in the new media age. In this paper, I would like to pick up one work from this exhibition, ITO Akihito's code of the river. I want to analyze his work to compare a Japanese traditional time consciousness, "MA", with that derived from moving image technology in the new media age.

ITO Akihito, code of the river (2003)

ITO Akihito was born in 1976. Since 1999 he has produced mainly video works. He participated in ISEA2002, and was accepted the 3rd Seoul Indie Video Festival. ITO's code of the river is a short video loop made up of the image of 30 river patterns. He sets two rules for making it, which he describes as follows:

"Rule no.1: With the screen of the work (comprised of 24fps) divided into twenty-four squares, each frame per square is designed to produce precisely one second time lag than the others, showing its image in its own time frame (1 second is the smallest unit for an image).

Rule no.2: Each of the river images repeats a fade in to fade out sequence every second. They are organized using the method of separating image into 24 parts as specified above."(1)

In ITO's statement, I focus on the way in which he uses the rules and technique of cinema; 24 frame per second and fade in and fade out. Based on these rules, ITO makes some precise rhythm units, fade in and fade out, black and pattern. We could assume that he sets up two rules for making a precise rhythm.

Next, I would like to consider meaning of "black" on his work. I quote his statement again.

"According to Christian METZ since fade out is a movement towards black, the color that expresses the absence of sensory perception, it is visually silent. Here, a movement towards nothing brings about some kind of pattern on the screen by shifting and manipulating the time axis."(2)

ITO refers to METZ to explain the use of "black" in making transitions from one river pattern to another. In 1970's writing on the semiotics of cinema, METZ stated that fade out is just a punctuation, a moment in which nothing going on. However, ITO considers that fade out is a meaning pause. He aims to express the deepest feeling with "black", therefore, he makes patterns on the screen towards nothing and from nothing. And furthermore, ITO's regard of fade out as a meaning pause, not just an interval or punctuation but a pause filled with the deepest feeling between two things, is enough, I will go on to show, to invoke MA, a Japanese traditional consciousness of time and space.

The code of the river has two faces; one is ticking a precise rhythm and the other is "black" with deepest feeling, in spite of its reproduction according to a precise rhythm unit like a metronome. To explore the relationship between these two aspects, I will briefly introduce two different models of time consciousness: that based on the moving image and the Japanese traditional time consciousness from the view point of MA. Finally, I want to make clear why those are not discrete conceptions and then return to an analysis ITO's work.

Time consciousness derived from the moving image

In considering a conception of time consciousness based on the moving image, I want to start for this question, what did the birth of moving images mean?

Henri BERGSON, in attempting to characterise the mechanisms involved in the perception of "becoming", wrote that "Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us. We may therefore sum up what have been saying in the conclusion that the mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind. "(3)

Even though BERGSON criticized the mechanism of the cinematograph for deceiving people into thinking of time as space, he admitted a great influence of cinematograph for our perception.

How does the mechanism of cinema influence our time consciousness? Media theorist, Siegfried ZIELINSKI points out that:

"The steel core of the recording and projection equipment is nothing more than an adapted clock... At least sixteen times per second, the perforated strip is precisely transported a little further, stopped, then pushed forward again..."(4)

In his statement, he connect cinema with clock. The clock brought people abstract and punctual time. Here, the need of cinema to replace frames precisely must be emphasized. To do so, film technology had to cooperate with automatic chronometers. This mechanism is premised upon a conception that "now" is a point and that punctual, successive points (now) generate the moving image.

The Japanese traditional time consciousness

Next I focus on MA, a conception of Japanese traditional consciousness to analyze the time consciousness of young Japanese media artists. Etymologist SHIRAKAWA Shizuka gives a definition of MA as:

"The space between things. This word means not only a spatial relationship but also an interval of time. MA shows a process in contrast to the term TOKI (time), which indicates a particular point."(5)

NAKAI Shoichi, a Japanese aesthetician active from the 1930s to 50s, focused on the time aspect of MA. NAKAI paid attention to technology, especially cinema, to examine Japanese traditional beauty and to ask what might be the role of aesthetics in the machine age. NAKAI suggested we could perceive MA as cut out from the flow of time:

"We usually think time is continuous like a string, but time is cut out and we feel that we become something new. This is MA, the time of Japanese art. "(6)

This alludes to the idea that MA has some duration and that this is not simply a point located on a precise rhythm. Moreover, we give birth to something new; MA is an interval cut out from the flow of time, a void filled with information and a wholeness from which anything might emerge.

Next, I want to introduce a relationship between MA and now. In Japanese, now is IMA. Is MA etymologically related to IMA (now)?

"IMA: Now, at present. 'I' is prefix of emphasis. 'MA' might mean 'MA'."(7)

SHIRAKAWA says that IMA is decomposed into "I" and "MA", and "I" emphasises "MA." It is crucial that IMA is derives from MA and, as the result of stressing MA, is almost always used to show time. In consequence, we could consider that IMA emphasises a time aspect of MA. To reflect upon NAKAI's discussion of MA, "now" in Japan might be thought of in terms of a face cut out from time flow.

Crossover of two time consciousnesses

Then, I can say that there is a difference between the consciousness of time derived from the moving image and the Japanese traditional time consciousness in the case of perceiving "now".

The former is to grasp "now" as a point in punctual rhythm.
The latter is to grasp "now" as a face cut out from time flow.

I want to look into a relationship between those two types of time consciousness in the new media age. Moving image technology began to divide time into small pieces. In the case of moving film, for example, 24fps means that one second is divided into 24 frames. The advent of the computer which produces a minute, punctual rhythm has changed the operation of dividing "now".

In "New Philosophy for New Media", Mark HANSEN tries to rethink the consciousness of "now". He considers the work of artist Bill VIOLA to analyze the consciousness of "now." VIOLA shot high-speed film (384 fps) and played this back at the customary 30 fps. As a result, he created extreme slow motion that was seamless and steady. HANSEN says that his work enlarges an interval between two frames to make us re-consider the consciousness of "now" in the new media age.

"Viola's work thus installs the technical supplement smack in the heart of the present itself: as a techno-functional extension of protention, new media technology operates entirely within the interval of the now, as the supplement of protention that, by oversaturating the now with information, enlarges it, and by enlarging it, catalyzes the self-affection of consciousness that is constitutive of time-consciousness."(8)

VIOLA enlarges 'the interval of the now' with extreme slow motion to stress what "now" is. Even though this may have been evident from the birth of moving image technology, new media technology accentuates that "now" is not a point but a matrix of time. "Now" could be enlarged; a matrix shaped by minute moments. Moving image technology fuses with new media technology in the information age and, I would suggest, has influenced the consciousness of "now."

If the essence of "now" is changing as we are able to manipulate the infinitesimal "now" with new technology, then we must rethink the meaning of MA. In manipulating the infinitesimal "now", a living face of time which composes MA is decomposed into a matrix of small moments. The conception of MA is in transition from a void filled with meaning to a matrix of small moments located on a punctual rhythm.

To sum up, I can say that "now" is enlarged and MA is eroded by the infinitesimal punctual rhythm. I suggest therefore that in sharing a matrix of small moments, the two time consciousnesses crossover.

A time consciousness of young Japanese media artists

Based on the argument so far, I want to analyze ITO's code of the river gain. At first, ITO divides the screen of his work into 24 squares to make a matrix of small moments using a rule of 24fps. According to the rhythm of 24fps, he rhythmically fills each cell of the matrix with a river scene and a pattern appears. Moreover, the black and pattern compose the rhythm unit. In this, the black just appears and disappears; next the pattern appears and disappears ... more than anything else, ITO plays the rhythm of 24fps to compose his work.

Furthermore, code of the river invokes the notion of MA strongly. Why? The reason is that the "black" connects nothing and being. One pattern, which is a movement toward nothing, goes to the black. The other pattern shows a river scene completely born from the black. Consequently, ITO uses the black scene with fade in and fade out to confront the rhythm of 24fps, which can bear something new. To do so, ITO cuts out a duration of meaning from the punctual rhythm. In short, there is MA on the matrix of infinitesimal moments.

NAKAI pointed out that to grasp "now" as a face cut out from time flow was an essence of MA. However, after fifty years, it is difficult to find the Japanese traditional consciousness directly in the work of young Japanese media artists. They are living surrounded by many moving images, like movies, television, video games and Internet. Therefore, first of all, they are influenced by the moving image technology and familiar with the punctual rhythm, which that technology generates. The punctual rhythm, like 24fps, is basic time consciousness. They just play it.

However, the infinitesimal punctual rhythm machine, the computer has emerged in the information age. This means that we have an apparent increasingly flexibility in manipulating time, and time becomes more clearly conceived of as having an artificial nature. In this artificial

nature, the time consciousness derived from the moving image technology and the Japanese traditional time consciousness are mixed.

In conclusion, I suggest that young Japanese media artists become aware of Japanese traditional time consciousness under a basic condition of technological time consciousness. This paper suggests that a further investigation of the works of young Japanese media artists, in terms of conception of time consciousness, would be worthwhile.

References

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