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Andersson, Fred

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Takahiko iimura: Video and Semiology (Dec. -03)

Fred Andersson

Concluding report from Takahiko iimura's screenings and seminar at Lund University, Dec. -03:

Introduction: The context of Takahiko iimura's activities in New York in the Sixties and Seventies is Western minimalism and conceptualism with its interest in Eastern culture and thinking. In this cultural context and in these circles, the Eastern principle of forgetting one's identity and one's self by means of meditative and repetitive exercise became one great source of inspiration in the reaction against various kinds of emotionalism and expressionism. A renewed interest in the work of certain members of the early Russian avant-garde, notably Malevich, was another aspect of this tendency. With his Asian background and his keen knowledge of European modernism, iimura really had every chance to fit in, and yet it seems that he from the start preferred to follow his own route. To quote the film critic Scott McDonald, iimura soon came to distrust "those forms of film-making which involve the collection or creation of meaningful or beautiful or interesting images".

At the invitation of professor Jan-Gunnar Sjölin, following an initial suggestion from doctoral candidate Fred Andersson, Takahiko iimura visited our department during December 1st to December 4th 2003. A selection of mr iimura's video- and media-works from ca 1970 to the present day were screened on the evenings of December 2nd and 3rd. The screenings were attended by a great number of students at all educational levels of the department. A list of the screened works, with mr iimura's own comments, is added at the end of this report. A seminar in the presence of mr iimura was held on December 4th, with the aim of discussing the semiotic issues raised in his CD-ROM presentation *Observer/Observed and other works of video semiology*. Even if the discussion didn't aim at general conclusions, it could be summarized as follows:

Three basic issues would be most crucial for any in-depth discussion about the series of 11 short video-pieces (with and without aural elements) which, with the addition of storyboards and written comments, constitute this CD-ROM:

A.) The distinction between: 1.) Semiology/semiotics as a scientific discipline, and 2.) Semiological/semiotic demonstrations as art

B.) The validity of various claims concerning similarities between basic units of film montage and basic units of spoken/written language

C.) The specificity of the medium of video, as compared the medium of reel film

A.) The first issue has to do with the basic distinction between any science and the objects of that science, or between any scientific operation and the results of such operations. As Jan-Gunnar Sjölin remarked in connection to the seminar, a regular science would be an activity in which the results could be comprehended in separation from the underlying operations, indeed without knowledge of these operations. This is obviously not the case with the CD-ROM *Observer/Observed*, because mr iimura's written comments are to a great extent descriptions of certain operations which must surely be seen and heard in order to be fully comprehended. Rather than being a scientific semiology, in which a clear-cut distinction could be made between general claims/theories and the experimental and conceptual operations leading to such claims, mr iimura's work might be regarded as

semiological in a more general sense of the word: as demonstrations of a "logic of signs" leading to experiences of contradiction and polysemy. The crucial importance of actually experiencing the operations as audio-visual video pieces in order to understand their contradictive and polysemious nature would, basically, be what qualifies this whole project to be termed art. Doctoral candidate Jan Jönsson's question whether the written comments are to be regarded as a part of the artwork *Observer/Observed*, or just as a secondary comment, really didn't get a final answer. It was however related to the question whether the video pieces would be the same *without* the written comments: i.e. whether these comments add information that's not already evident in the videos. If we agree with mr iimura that they do, we might also discuss whether the conclusions of the written comments evidently follow from what we see and hear in the video pieces. There might then be some considerable disagreement on this matter. Regarding the general "scientific" tone of *Observer/Observed* (as, actually, of much conceptual art), Fred Andersson suggested that the project might share some affinity with a more experimental approach in semiotics. He then presumed that we could make a clear distinction between, on the one hand, semiotics as a systematic analysis and/or classification of existing "texts", and on the other semiotics as a more experimental research involving an actual fabrication of "texts" in order to create test situations that could positively contribute to our more specific knowledge of the phenomenon referred to as semiosis or ”genesis of meaning”. As Jan-Gunnar Sjölin remarked, there might however be reasons to doubt that such a clear-cut distinction could be made.

B.) As for the second issue, concerning analogies between film montage and verbal language, claims made for three or even four articulations in moving images must be unfeasible, mainly because the hypothetical level of cinematic figurae/phonemes would merge with the hypothetical level of cinematic signs, and because the hypothetical level of signs would merge with the hypothetical level of semantic meaning. Thus, the single shot might with equal claims of validity be compared to a word standing for a certain concept (as in Eisenstein’s montage theory), and to a whole sentence involving such grammatical elements as subject, object and predicate. To recount the same argument the other way around, a shot showing a sleeping cat might correspond to the verbal statement ”the fat cat lies on the pillow” as well as ”cat on pillow” or just ”cat”. One of the key arguments in mr iimura's written comments to *Observer/Observed* is, however, that the comparison between shot and language might be done not only in terms of words and sentences, but also of what he calls ”object sentences” in which the subject is omitted. His example, from the piece "This is a camera 2" (2nd piece in the series on the CD-ROM), is to say "is a camera" instead of ”this is a camera” [iimura 1998, p. 33]. This is a common phenomenon in Japanese. In this context, mr iimura writes as follows: ”After all, a picture taken as a shot has no subject, but exists like an object with a predicate, an ’object sentence’” [iimura 1998, p. 35]. Against this claim, one could easily object that it isn’t at all self evident that a shot of a sitting man should be compared to the statement ”man sit” rather than ”the man sits” (in which the word ”man” is clearly subject). What's more, an "object sentence" with a predicate would always have to include some kind of "implied" subject (otherwise there would be no predicate). A possible interpretation of mr iimura's statement would be, then, that every thing seen actually amounts to one single "object sentence", namely ”thing seen”, with the implied subject "thing seen /by me/". What happens in the mentioned work "This is a camera 2" is, however, that the "seer" isn't a person but a camera "shooting" another camera which in turn "shoots" the first camera. The structure of verbal statements and visual images is as follows: "This is a camera which shoots" (image of camera 1) "this" (cut to image of white wall) "is a camera which shoots" (panning to image of camera 2) "this" (cut to image of white wall), etc. Thus, as a consequence of this elliptical structure, the thing singled out as the subject of the statement "/this/ is a camera which shoots" is also the object of the preceding statement "camera which shoots /this/", and the word

"this" is always in the ambiguous position of being both the subject of the present statement and the object of the preceding statement (except in the opening statement). It would be fair, then, to agree with mr iimura that in this special case the subject is made "incommunicable" (or put into a parenthesis). But being a very special case, this then leads us to the third question:

C.) Concerning the specificity of the video medium. During the seminar, mr iimura remarked that in a film image I can film myself as an ”I” (like Dziga Vertov did), but not as ”myself”. More simply put, you have to step up in front of the camera in order to film yourself, but you can’t remain behind the camera, in the position of an ”I” filming ”yourself”, unless you use a mirror. In video, a short circuit video system could serve as a mirror, but without equaling a mirror. When a video screen is filmed with a camera connected to the screen, there is a tunnel effect that is totally different from the effect of two facing mirrors. The reason is simple: to see the tunnel produced by the mirrors you have to place yourself (your head) or a camera between the mirrors, and thus you can’t avoid seeing yourself (or the camera). In the video tunnel effect, by contrast, there is nothing but the tunnel. The ”thing seen” here could actually be defined as a ”video thing” seeing its own seeing! And by adding other cameras and monitors to the video system, you can actually "shoot" yourself not as "I" but as "myself" in the present tense, like mr iimura does in the piece "I see you/myself" (the 9:th piece in the series) which is constituted by the variations of "I see you who is shooting me" and "I see myself who is shooting you". One particularly interesting example of the ambiguity characterizing much of these word-image relations is the piece ”This is a monitor 1” (3:rd piece in the series), in which the verbal statement ”This is a monitor” is repeated in connection to images of the tunnel effect (camera-monitor feedback), a switched-off monitor (camera on), and a turned-on monitor with ”white noise” (camera off). The statement could be regarded as true in all cases, but in different respects: the switched-off monitor is actually a picture of a monitor shown on a monitor (which is in itself a picture that could be shown on a monitor), the white noise image actually shows no monitor but could be shown on a monitor, and the tunnel effect is actually the same monitor within the same monitor for infinity. As research fellow Max Liljefors remarked during the seminar, these fundamentally introversive relations could be related to Rosalind Krauss's influential definition of video as a narcissist technology (a definition which doesn't necessarily amount to a characterization of actual intentions or mental states of existing authors). Mr iimura's sharp disagreement on this point must be due to the fact that his work relates more to linguistic and phenomenological thought than to psychology or psychoanalysis, and that his general approach in such a work as *Observer/Observed* is in fact descriptive rather than interpretative.

ADDITIONAL REMARK: A basic figure of *Observer/Observed*, and a figure which summarizes much of the specificity of video, is "1 sees 2 sees 1". Here, 2 functions as both subject and object of the phrase. In the actual case of two people staring at each other, both are staring subjects as well as objects stared at: this could be written "1 sees 2 sees 1 sees 2". In the mentioned piece "This is a camera 2", in which camera 1 "shoots" camera 2 which "shoots" camera 1 (as already described), the word "this" refers both to the white wall (i.e. an empty image which is still "this" image) and to the camera. But instead of repeating "is a camera which", the verbal element of this work could well be reduced to "this (1) shoots this (2) shoots this (1)", because the cameras shown are numbered, and so their identity is evident anyway. Perhaps this verbal redundancy is more crucial for the analysis of the word-image relations of this work than the observation that the isolated phrase "is a camera which" could be regarded as an "object sentence"? Furthermore, it's clear that when making an inquiry into the wider semiotic implications of such a work as *Observer/Observed* we should take into account not only the cases of iconicity (such as the likeness of a visual image) or symbolicity (such as the structure of spoken language) but

also the cases of indexicality (in terms of contiguous relations between signifiers and signifieds, and between objects in the real world). Example: in the case of the white wall indexically referred to by the demonstrative pronoun "this", only the panning from "this" wall to another, contiguous point in the room constitute the truth of the final phrase "this /is a camera/". This also means that the image of the white wall in a way becomes an image of the emptiness of the word "this" (the emptiness of a shifter).

Fred Andersson, January 2004

Reference: iimura, Takahiko (1998), "A Semiology of Video" in *takahiko iimura at the Lux: film, video, CD-ROM, installation*, London: The Lux Centre

Video Program by Takahiko iimura, Lund 2/12 2003 — Words and Images:

I have compiled the following videos, among works of mine which are oriented towards the subject of "Words and Images":

A Chair (excerpt) 1970, b/w, 5 min.
A chair, illuminated by a film projector, casts its shadow within the frame of a TV screen. The shadow, which flickers, synchronizes with the sound of white noise.

Blinking (excerpt) 1970, b/w, 2 min. With Akiko iimura.
The eyes of a woman in nega/posi images are blinking. The horizontal stripes caused by fast-forwarding the tape at various speeds are visible over the images. They are accompanied by sounds resulting from this process.

Time Tunnel (excerpt) 1971, b/w, 5 min.
The narrator reads numbers that are shown on a monitor, in a counting from 10 to 1. Tunnel images are produced by means of a closed circuit video system (video and camera in feedback).

Double Portrait 1973-87, b/w, 6 min. With Taka and Akiko iimura.
Taka and Akiko iimura try to identify, separately, both the positive and negative identification of their names. Their voices are often distorted mechanically.

I Love You 1973-87, b/w, 5 min. With Taka and Akiko iimura.
Taka and Akiko iimura exchange vocally "I love you", "You love me", "He/She loves you," and so on, while the views of their faces shift: Front, Profile, and Back views.

This is A Camera Which Shoots This 1982-95, b/w, 5 min. With Taka iimura.
A performer with a camera walks between two facing cameras and monitors, reading loudly a sentence written on the wall — “This is a camera which shoots this” — and shoots the cameras inside and outside of the monitors.

As I See You See Me 1990-97, b/w, 7 min. With Taka iimura.
A similar performance as "This is A Camera..." but the words are different as well as the content. On two monitors, the words "I" and "You" are pasted separately, and a performer loudly reads a sentence on the wall: "As I See You See Me" while walking between two facing cameras and monitors without shooting them.

AIUEONN Six Features 1993, color, 7 min. With Taka iimura.
Combining the comical and the absurd, I created six funny faces to animate the visual

images of Japanese vowels in Japanese and Roman alphabet. The concept is developed from Jacques Derrida's writings on "Differance" (with "a"), in which the differences between "image", "letter" and "voice" are defined in terms of space and movement. The six images of “AIUEONN” function as differing and delaying counterparts to the accompanying letters and voices. The work would also be considered as an example of multiculturalism. (T.I.)

John Cage Performs James Joyce 1985, color, 15 min.
A private performance by John Cage, in which he realizes his “Writing For The Fifth Time Through Finnegans Wake” in three ways: reading, singing, and whispering (T.I.) The text is “taken by means of I Ching chance operation...from Finnegans Wake” (John Cage)

MA: Space/Time in the Garden of Ryoan-ji 1989, color, 16 min.
When making the film of Ryoan-ji, I thought about "MA" as an indivisible state of time and space, and tried to describe the state in filmic terms. Such garden spaces and its stones have been the subject of many photographs and movies. But I thought of not merely showing the concept of "MA", but also of creating a real experience of "MA" through viewing the film. In other words, not to make a film that’s merely an illustration of a verbal text, as in usual art instructional films, but to turn the viewing of the film into an actual experience of "MA". (T.I.)

Takahiko iimura, December 2003

Media Program by Takahiko iimura, Lund 3/12 2003:

AIUEONN — Six Features and a Game of Words Which Starts With the Letter A, 1999, CD-ROM
See: review by Fred Andersson

Observer/Observed and Other Works of Video Semiology, 1999, CD-ROM
See: review by Mike Leggett

Seeing, Hearing, Speaking, 2002, DVD
See: review by Fred Andersson

FA, 8/1-04