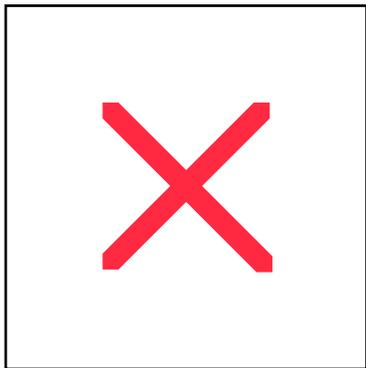


Peep "TV" Show



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February 16th 2004

In 1960s underground culture, experimental film directors like Shuji Terayama urged people to throw away their books and head into the streets, where the real issues of the day were slugged out. Director Yutaka Tsuchiya, known primarily for his documentary films, has made a feature film with the documentary touches of the DV-era that hits a similar nerve. His latest DV-film, Peep "TV" Show, is confrontational towards a mass media that aestheticizes suffering, and plunks events "like the Iraq war, all that fuss about Tama-chan, and Yosuke Kubozuka's shotgun wedding" all on the same level. At the same time, it too is fascinated with the deluge of images that pipe faraway world events into the streets and bedrooms of current-day Tokyo.

Tsuchiya premiered a rough cut of Peep "TV" Show at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in October 2003. The general audience consensus was that (barring some overlong sequences) the film's punk ethos vividly conveyed both the energy and the disenchantment that people of many demographics feel living in a restructuring economy. Peep "TV" Show tells the story of how lives are set in flux by faraway economic and political changes, and how those with longings for alternative

communities in particular should relate to the increasing reality of being tied to a security state.

This theme is relevant to two topical questions both featured in the film: the escalation of response in Japan after 9/11 and 9/17, triggering the dispatch of funds and troops to Iraq, and the fact that the "window on the world" that is the digital screen has created a whole new network for making sense of these relationships, stretching from computer, to TV, to cell-phone, to security camera. Peep "TV" Show follows the relationship of hipster salaryman Hasegawa and gothic lolita Moé, two disaffected kids who meet through Hasegawa's on-line diary. A computer company-man by day, Hasegawa moonlights as a surveillance otaku. Pierced, long-haired, and tattooed from neck to knee, he never eats, lives in an apartment whose only furniture is shadows, and is completely repelled by his tacky fetish-loving office-mate who offers him tips on video chat rooms - "yeah, they're getting paid, but it's so real."

A lot of recent films and anime show kids and new media in a tortured kind of deadlock. Ring's message is basically "dub or die." The only person to survive viewing the notorious videotape makes a copy and sales-pitches it to a whole new audience. The character's life is prolonged by absorbing the job usually taken on by the marketing department. Other examples of what writer Jessica Crewe calls "media horror" films - like Pulse, or anime like Serial Experiment Lain or Perfect Blue - typically kill off identities that are overinvested in new media. They show cyber-space to be a black hole where you fall off the social map, or encounter other fatal dangers. In contrast, Peep "TV" Show finds room for re-organizing reality in the new media of on-line broadcasts, cell phones, and ever-smaller cameras. Through the coming-

of-age story of Hasegawa and Moé, it asks why people only seem to be alive if they are preserved in exchangeable, exhibitionist digital form - like cell phones, cameras, puri-kura, and surveillance cameras.

Peep "TV" show finds signs of life in youth subcultures often dismissed by politicians and the mainstream press as "social problems," in the archetypes of enjo kosai, wild boys, and people who refuse to leave their rooms. One computer otaku, who has made major steps by venturing from his room to go to the local convenience store, explains in the film, "it's the world that's a mess, not us." Peep "TV" Show sympathizes with this confession of adolescent angst, but takes the question to the streets - then back to the bedroom - via the screen. It shows kids using screens to build alliances in their "private" spaces of apartments and street-corners to help them cope with how the world thinks it has changed its images of economics and nationalism after 9/11. As Moé declares from Shibuya at the end of the film, "this is where the plane hit us."

After seeing the money-shot images of the WTC fireball on TV, Hasegawa becomes both intrigued and morally repelled by his own aesthetic attachment to the constantly re-run images. "On Sept 11, 2843 people were killed when a fireball hit the WTC. It was a beautiful sight. I sat with a beer in one hand, glued to the TV." When you click on "I peep," from home, you're linked to a diary of the WTC-bound pilots beginning their journey on 8/15/02, a WTC-bound journey which suggests that Hasegawa is also heading toward a confrontation built for media consumption. As it turns out, August 15 is also the day that people commemorate Japan's WW2 dead at Yasukuni Shrine. (This visit again being contemplated by prime minister Junichiro Koizumi was the

subject of one of Tsuchiya's earlier documentary films.) Hasegawa starts to "peek under the rubble at the corpses" of his own world of disenchanted workers, by capturing and displaying images on his website diary, peeptvshow.net. The backdrop for the film is provided by the camera-studded streets and stores of "risto-cut" era Tokyo, the new economic reality of downsizing where people resent their jobs yet cling to them, for fear they might be privatized Koizumi-style into something even more ephemeral. Other characters include a salaryman who lives to sleep, a convenience store hourly employee who harbors thoughts of revolution while monitoring the anti-shoplifting cameras in the back of the store, and an office worker in a trading company. These are archetypes familiar to anyone who has seen the "mall movies" of the 1980s and 90s, but in this film, the spirit of soulless consumer culture is more Buffy than Lost Boys.

Hasegawa is filled with righteous anger because he thinks no one recognizes that Shibuya is in fact a "ground zero" impacted in some way after 9/11. This makes him perhaps the only one awake in this world of the living dead. The trading company worker sighs over her family restaurant dinner that, "I wish a plane would fly into my place and wake everybody up." She gets her wake-up call as Hasegawa hooks up a camera to her window, indulges in the retro crime of stealing her phone bill, and calls her to ask, essentially, if she is in the house alone. Not content with enjoying her fright, he puts the images up for viewing on his site. While this theft and display is sadistic, Hasegawa knows full well that in mainstream media culture, only certain kinds of spectacular suffering produce the kind of emotional reaction he wants to provoke.

At a post-screening Q&A session at Yamagata, accompanied

by collaborator Karin Amamiya and actor Takayuki Hasegawa, Tsuchiya explained how he tried to liken the cozy intimacy that watching and being watched provides, with the fact of surveillance being written large, ultimately writing Japan into a set of hardline stances on its way to becoming a security state. "People feel security is something that envelops them and protects them," Tsuchiya explained. The film is Tsuchiya's first fiction work, and in some ways a follow-up to his 1998 The New God, which traces right-wing punk singer Karin Amamiya's drift away from her band, a group that had been loosely inspired by Yoshinori Kobayashi's best-selling manga On War. Kobayashi's revisionist "true stories" about Japanese history gave the backstories for twentieth-century national pride at the expense of global issues. As a charismatic TV showman, he argued that people needed to be proud of Japan, in effect "protected" from the rest of the world and their ties to it, before they turned to pay attention to global economics and politics.

Tsuchiya differs from this popular-nationalist stance. But his film responds to a similar impulse, the desire of Kobayashi's student-age readers to be seen and written into a community larger than themselves. Although Kobayashi is often criticized for getting his stories wrong, and for his dogmatic insistence on national pride, his polemic challenges Tsuchiya's film to address how nationalism's allure presents a stopgap solution for youth culture's longing for emotional connection. Hasegawa, too, begins as a truth-seeker asserting himself in the same one-dimensional way as Kobayashi, though his beliefs differ. His first impulse is to use surveillance to strip the coziness from someone - the office worker - who normally felt it protected her. While initially responding to the unprecedented WTC event, Hasegawa's take on "ground zero" uses documentary touches

that place characters within familiar generic frames. The film is really more interested in how events are spectacularized into stories, than with the faithfulness of the image. This is borne out in Hasegawa's enjoyment while stalking the office worker. His tracking follows the horror-movie conventions of waiting in a dark alley to prey on the woman who is not sufficiently alert to danger. And placing his skills and belief in technology to hasten a revelation recalls the sci-fi practiced by the high achievers of Aum disenchanted with their lack of future.

Where Hasegawa seeks a pornographically intense glimpse of humanity, the girls create alternate realities by disassociating from ideal forms. Moé's chosen subculture is gothic Lolita. Dressed meticulously in petticoated skirt, apron, bonnet, and frilled cap sleeves, the refinement of lace mixed with the social ambiguity of a vampire. She sleeps posed like Ophelia, and she always makes eye contact with the security camera, with a gaze more grateful than paranoid. Her friend Nagomi puts up a web diary that makes her self-destructive tendencies into a lushly designed thing of beauty, equating suffering with life.

One sequence that conveys Peep "TV" Show's characters' media savviness is a montaged series of cinéma vérité-like interviews with Moé's friends who dress up in pricey goth gear, exchange shopping tips, and hang out in Harajuku. Each shot has the posed candor of a "reality" script, but is spoken in an oddly disembodied way, to address someone who is not actually there: "I'm Moé, aged 18. I don't really work these days, and I don't really go to school. I'm looking for a friend, so come out and play!" The film manages to sympathize with the girls' feeling alive and connected by showing off in public. But the film also shows their

awareness that if all their energy is devoted to their hobbies of street styling, they have actually conceded that it is they, and not the world, that needs fixing. While wanting to stave off fetishists of innocence, lost innocence, and other types of sexualized girlhood, they routinely ham it up getting their pictures taken in the streets by otakus. In another sequence, a lovers' quarrel in a 6-mat room draws on TV's re-enacted fights. But it goes beyond milking the sensation to lead the dispute into comedy, as the two harangue each other about how to balance private (whether the boyfriend is a mooch and should pay back his loan to his girlfriend before ranting about his anti-war efforts), and public (whether the girlfriend is actually the World Bank in a t-shirt, getting her boyfriend deeper and deeper into debt) dimensions of their relationship.

Although Hasegawa initially wants to use his camera as a kind of apocalyptic stun gun to bring people back to their senses, Peep "TV" Show 's attitude toward its characters' spying makes it very different from other movies about surveillance culture, such as the indie *Focus* (1993) and the bigger-budget *The Choice of Hercules* (Totsunyu Seyo!! Asama Sanso Jiken, 2002). These two films confine the hard-hitting parts of their media society critiques to how truth is manipulated within the image frame. Both crime films, they believe that if you just shake down the image long enough, it will spill the clues needed to tell the story, punish the criminal, and restore order. *Focus*, like the truth-seeker impulse in Hasegawa, ultimately betrays its main character. The otaku protagonist gets punished for peeping on his neighbour. Picked by a TV production team to be a native informant of the otaku lifestyle, he confesses the how-tos of his perversion. This leads him into capturing footage of a yakuza scheme in progress, a situation from which his dormant social skills cannot excavate him. Things spin out of

control, and he is ultimately killed, as he would be in a newer media horror film, although justice is served by thwarting the yakuza. The film ends as a cynical lament to the abstract power of the media gone awry, at the same time it chalks up the otaku's death as necessary to capture the yakuza.

Masato Harada's *The Choice of Hercules* is structured by the kind of re-enactments like the lovers' quarrel sequence in *Peep "TV" Show*. It makes history seem real by cooking the footage of extracted factoids from TV's first "reality show" - the camera trained on the mountain cabin which housed the mythic demise of the Japanese left in 1972. Then it re-imagines the story around the harried heroic figure of detective Koji Yakusho, and whether he has the stamina to effectively implement his vision. In contrast to these films' concern with bringing reality to justice by locating good and evil within characters, *Peep "TV" Show* is more interested in what level of reality we are hoping to make secure when we look for "reality" in digital images.

One more refreshing element of *Peep "TV" Show* is its lack of moralism about either people's desires to show themselves as exhibitionists, prolonging their social lives, or their desires to look full on at other people. If there is a moralism in the film, it is in the distinction between Hasegawa's plunder of images and the exchange of images that Hasegawa and Moé undertake at the end of the film, in turn selling to a set of subscribers. *Peep "TV" Show* wants to ask if there is such a thing as a free trade or fair trade in images, and how that playful economy is the same as or different than the one that makes Shibuya a ground zero of its own. Its combination of tactical media and feature film storytelling, sympathetic characters and globalized agenda make *Peep "TV" Show* worth seeking out.