

Living in the Age of Involved Parties



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An interview with Toshinao Sasaki

Interview by Chiaki Soma
Photo: Ryosuke Kikuchi

Journalism that merely conveys facts as facts has broken down in the wake of the Tohoku disaster. In both the disaster zones and Tokyo, west Japan and even the world, it has become problematic for the mass media to communicate the “involvement” [tojishasei] segmented and bound up by the phantasm of the masses.

Minority Possession in the Arts

Tokyo / Scene: In your book you bring up the concept of “minority possession”. For those of us involved in theatre and the arts, this is a very compelling problem. For example, if in a certain work of art there was to be a scene representing the tsunami, the audiences watching this would start to criticize it. They would say, “Could you show this play to the people in the disaster zones?” The logic behind this criticism that speaking for the victims without permission is itself mired in this “minority possession”.

Sasaki: There is a misunderstanding related to my book. Those creating artistic expression are often told that they are prone to minority possession, so they should not say anything. They are told, it’s fine for the people in the disaster zones to do it but if you are not one of the victims, then you must not speak. I think that is totally wrong.

Ultimately, what is important here is having the idea of expressing something while being aware that you are in no way one of the involved parties [tojisha]. Some time ago the film director Tatsuya Mori, who had covered the Aum Shinrikyo cult, wrote an article on a blog about abolishing the death penalty. Mori is opposed to the death penalty but if you write “Abolish the death penalty!” there will always be people on Twitter and other networks who say, “Could you say that in front of the bereaved families?” That is classic minority possession.

Tojisha no jidai

Going beyond the discourse of being merely a mouthpiece for minorities, what kind of vision of reality can artistic and theatrical expression present in this erratic society? Tokyo / Scene speaks to Toshinao Sasaki, the journalist and author of post-3.11 era book “The Age of the Involved” [Tojisha no jidai] (2012).



Tatsuya Mori responded, “Then we don’t need to execute someone who kills the victims who survived?” The moment you talk about the feelings of the victims and the bereaved, you bring in a totally different issue. Rather than talking about things like how much you can feel the emotions of the bereaved, we should start from recognising the extent of the distance from them that can never be overcome. I felt that that was exactly how it should be. However, comprehending and conceiving of that distance is extremely difficult.

TS: Yes, it certainly is. For example, if we were to present something about the Middle East in Japan, there are all kinds of complex religious, political and ethnic history and contexts. Interpreting everything is difficult and yet, unless we convey complexities in all their complexity, we lose the audience in a watered down version. We are always concerned about this double bind.

Yes. Recently I went to a screening of an Iranian film but the audience was mostly, how can I say... civil activists: people with the mindset that it is all rather sad for the children of Iranian and they want to do something for them. And the distribution company also, if it wants to do well at the box office, it has to present that kind of simplistic narrative. When the subject is the Third World like the Middle East or Africa, the configuration will always lapse into this.

I think that the age of mass consumption will end. The era of post-war popular culture has not had any particular trouble. In other words, it has always just been going and going, so there was no necessity to disentangle complex contexts and think about things deeply. Japan today is still in the shadow of post-war society; the after-glow continues. The coming era must exert itself as much as it can to decipher difficulties with clarity, just as they are.

Carving Gradation into the Phantasm of the Masses

TS: Due to the catastrophe, everyone had an experience where the place where they were was shaken in a way they hadn’t thought of till now. For example, someone who is in Tokyo is not involved [tojisha], and yet if they were to go abroad, they would be seen as a victim regardless. The prescriptiveness of calling oneself an involved party [tojisha] vacillates depending on the situation where you prescribe from.

I’m originally a newspaper man, so I’ll talk about the media here. A newspaper cannot suppose to report all the population. However, what became apparent due to the Tohoku disaster was that it is not possible even to suppose readers who were all the population. For example, right after the catastrophe, I covered Kesenuma for two or three days and then returned to Sendai. There in the town, nothing was broken, it all just seemed so happy-go-lucky. Clearly, we had become possessed by the people of Kesenuma and had this feeling of animosity towards the people of Sendai. On the other hand, go on holiday to Kansai and there’s just carefree news on the radio. You get angry. “They’re not concerned at all about the earthquake!” you think. What I realized here was that the whole of Japan has become an incredibly patchwork sort of place. Those who suffered the tsunami, those who suffered the

nuclear meltdown, those in the Tokyo area who suffered neither but experienced the earthquake, those in west Japan with no nuclear uncertainty... We are somewhere narrowly maintaining our own place within this gradation. However, we are not able to relate well how society has become this patchwork-quilt. The media has also not finished clutching onto the gradation. The post-war middle-class society is imploding.

TS: Originally Japan also had immigrants and thus minorities, and is surely a kind of mosaic. In a sense it’s natural that we have finally started to realize this.

Biojournalism

Yes, this isn’t just a problem in the media. This is an individual problem for all of us. Leaving something in limbo is permissible in art or theatre, but in actual society we have to indicate whether something is black or white, and unless we make a presumption of an epicentre that is fictional, then it doesn’t work. I don’t know if this is the only solution, but one thing I’ve been personally considering has been the importance of empathizing in your own body, as in for art or music, making yourself the bridge to this impenetrable society, and then making some kind of expression.

TS: And refining that bridge just might be the journalism that we need, the journalism voiced from the individual. It is a method not only for those who create forms of expression, but also those who watch and critique.

Amongst the lexicon of contemporary theory there are the words “biopower” [biopouvoir] and “biopolitics” [biopolitique]: Not the power enforced by laws and rules, but the power prescribing your living itself, an environmental management form of power. For example, if you were to live on an uninhabited island, you would not be engulfed in any political power [biopolitics], but you would feel the influence of power by using the internet or some sort of supply chain.

In regards to this “biopolitics” I’ve been thinking about “biojournalism”: Moving from the journalism of merely covering something and then reporting it, to a journalism where you create exposure of information through your own corporeity, where you face up to something as someone involved [tojisha]. Rather than being possessed by a partner, what we should be doing is continuing to represent something whereby we are able to feel the place where we stand.

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Born in 1961. Studied politics at Waseda University but left without graduating, joining the Mainichi Newspaper in 1988. He was a reserve reporter for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, covering homicide, international terrorism and cybercrime. He joined ASCII in October 1999. He edited the corporation’s monthly journal, leaving in February 2003. Since then he has worked as a freelance journalist. His many publications include “The Age of Curation” (Chikuma shinsho, 2011), “The Age of the Involved” (Kobunsha shinsho, 2012).