



Article

As Seen from the Camera Obscura: Haniya Yutaka's Ontological Film Theory

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Abstract: Haniya Yutaka (1909–1997) was one of the leading figures in postwar Japanese literature and avant-garde art movements, chiefly remembered today for his unfinished metaphysical novel *Dead Souls* [Shirei, 1946–1997]. This essay, however, examines his hitherto unknown theoretical writings on film. Haniya and other writers gathering around the literary magazine *Kindai bungaku* [Modern Literature, 1946–1964] shared a keen interest in film's unparalleled importance in twentieth-century modernity. And their collective efforts to transgress conventional boundaries between literature and film culminated in the 1957 publication of the anthology entitled *Literary Film Theory* [Bungakuteki eigaron]. Above all, Haniya's film writing was clearly distinguished for its tendency to explicate film's paradoxical mode of existence *philosophically*, an approach that the film critic Matsuda Masao later called an "ontological film theory" [sonzaironteki eigaron]. Looking closely at his essays and interviews collected in *Literary Film Theory* and two other volumes on this topic—*Thoughts in the Darkness* [Yami no naka no shisō, 1962] and *Dreaming in the Darkness* [Yami no naka no musō, 1982]—the present essay reads Haniya's theorization of cinema in relation to both Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology and recent scholarly debates on non-Western film theory.

Keywords: film theory; ontology; postwar Japan; literature; avant-garde art



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1. Transgression from Literature

In 1957, the Japanese publishing house Chuō kōronsha published an edited volume entitled *Literary Film Theory* [Bungakuteki eigaron] (Noma et al. 1957). This modest 200-page booklet contained six essays from Japanese writers who played a central role in advancing "postwar literature" from an avant-garde perspective, namely, Noma Hiroshi, Sasaki Kiichi, Shiina Rinzō, Abe Kobō, Hanada Kiyoteru, and Haniya Yutaka. As Sasaki mentions in the afterword, however, the solidarity of these contributors was motivated by their shared pride that "we belonged to a generation that reached its adolescence at a time when cinema had become the newest artistic attraction" (Sasaki 1957, p. 190). For this reason, rather than being a collection of self-righteous essays that unilaterally discussed the superiority of literature over film, *Literary Film Theory* squarely addressed how these authors attempted to shed light on common problems that lay between the two different mediums of film and literature, through their actual involvement in providing original stories, writing scripts, and even forming their own film theories. The book therefore stood out as an example of a collective border-crossing consciously carried out by Japanese literary figures throughout the last century, and its historical significance is comparable to that of extraordinary interest in film that modernist writers like Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke had expressed in the Taishō era (1912–1925).

In addition to these apparent contributions, *Literary Film Theory* had an undeniable impact on the history of Japanese film theory. The latter half of the 1950s was a period in which a group of young filmmakers started revolutionizing filmmaking by directly opposing the existing film format and contents as well as modes of production. Ōshima Nagisa and Yoshida Kijū, for instance, challenged conventions of commercial filmmaking

under the banner of the Japanese or Shōchiku New Wave, whereas Matsumoto Toshio and Teshigahara Hiroshi explored the possibilities of experimental and independent film production. Tsuchimoto Noriaki and Ogawa Shinsuke, furthermore, began to reinvent documentary film as a tool for direct political action along with the rise of the New Left that ultimately led to a series of massive protests, known as the Anpo struggle. According to Matsuda Masao, a critic who had been involved in various art and political movements since the 1950s, the majority of young generation in this period “had been waiting for new film criticism or new film theory”, and “the emergence of this book”, he continues, “was received, above all, as a response to the needs of the times” (Matsuda 2001, p. 121).

Among the texts contained therein, Matsuda singles out the two following essays as ones that most clearly demonstrated the state of new film theory and criticism in the mid-to-late 1950s: Hanada Kiyoteru’s “On Film Directors” [*Eigakantokuron*] and Haniya Yutaka’s “Notes on Old Films” [*Furui eiga techō*]. By the time this book was published, Hanada had published a number of film-related essays and already developed his famous concept of “sur-documentary” (Hanada [1954] 1977e). While the French prefix *sur* here was obviously derived from Surrealism, this concept also meant a radical dialectic between the documentary method and the avant-garde aesthetic. Instead of passively accepting what the camera presents before us as a priori facts, creators of sur-documentary films must first of all be skeptical of our “normal” perception of reality, always aiming to reveal the fact that “concrete things in the external world exist as enigmatic and mysterious beings” (Hanada [1951] 1977d, p. 170). Following this line of thought, Hanada’s chapter strategically reintroduces Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of “montage of attractions” so as to further subvert or even nullify the schematic dyads between fiction and nonfiction, reason and experience, and, most importantly, art and politics (Hanada 1957). In this way, Hanada’s film theory not only served as a major inspirational source for his contemporary experimental filmmakers, like Matsumoto and Teshigahara, but also stimulated renewed interests among scholars of Japanese media and literature over the past decade¹.

In contrast, it seems difficult to grasp the importance of Haniya’s chapter entitled “Notes on Old Films” at first sight because the said chapter offers us an autobiographical account of the silent and black-and-white films he watched during his childhood (Haniya 1957). How could we, above all, make sense of Haniya’s self-contradictory decision to write about “old” films in his conscious attempt to propose a “new” film theory? Because of such an unmistakable rhetorical obscurity, Haniya’s film theory has failed to be recognized properly to date. But we should not be hasty to assume that the lack of tangible influence of his theory directly correlates to the inferiority of his argument. If, unlike Hanada and other contributors of the volume, Haniya’s commitment to film did not anticipate or relate to actual practice, what did inform his equally transgressive obsession with this modern visual medium throughout his career as a leftist cultural critic and the author of the very long and unfinished Dostoevskian novel called *Dead Souls* [*Shirei*, 1946–1997]? Moreover, what new insight could we obtain from reading Haniya’s film theory in relation not only to his personal development as a writer/thinker but also to the broader global context of cultural production and circulation in the 20th century?

This paper aims to answer these questions by excavating the long-forgotten genealogy of Haniya’s film essays that range from “Notes on Old Films” to *Thinking in the Darkness* [*Yami no naka no shisō*] and *Dreaming in the Darkness* [*Yami no naka no musō*], two other collections of his writings and interviews on film (Haniya 1962; Haniya and Ogawa 1982). More specifically, I read Haniya’s writings from the perspective of the so-called “ontological film theory”, following Matsuda’s perceptive assessment. Despite the frequent appearance of the term “ontology”, however, my reading here does not simply foreground Haniya’s informed reference to Aristotle and Heidegger. Rather, I employ this term precisely because Haniya’s writings on film always revolved around the simple but unsolved question “What is cinema?” from his “firm stance towards pursuing fundamental truths to the very end” (Matsuda 1997, p. 94). In this sense, it would be more appropriate to compare him with André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, and many other so-called “classical” film theorists who

equally pursued the same “ontological” question in their critical writings on cinema and its related phenomena. At the same time, I argue that Haniya’s exploration can also provide a new perspective for reflecting on the relationship between us living in the 21st century and the ever-changing cinema and, by extension, our very existence as mediated by various audiovisual and information media.

2. Paradoxical Existence of the Film Medium

On the last day of 1909, fourteen years after Lumière brothers’ cinematograph was first introduced in Paris, Haniya Yutaka was born in Hsinchu, Taiwan, as the son of a tax collector. This already tells us that he belonged to a generation that could declare without hesitation that “it was better to be educated by movies than to be educated at school.” (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, p. 94)². In fact, the process by which Haniya developed his affection for films clearly overlapped like a pair of mirrors with the process by which film developed from a sideshow spectacle on the outskirts of the city to the representative art and entertainment industry of the 20th century. In the meantime, it should be noticed that his own existence, the *raison d’être* for his being in this world, was equally marked by Japan’s colonial rule of Taiwan and other parts of Asia. For this reason, Haniya’s retroactive account of his childhood film experience—the topic repeatedly addressed in his film essays—can claim to be read as part of History with a capital H, just like his long and complicated commitment to communism before and after World War II.

Upon his migration to Tokyo in 1923, Haniya’s obsession with film began flourishing in earnest. During this period, Haniya made it a routine to go visit multiple theaters in succession every weekend and naturally became a hardcore movie fan who watched nearly all Hollywood and European films imported to Japan at the time. Moreover, because he somehow believed that it was his duty “to completely memorize the program from top to bottom including information about the original story, adaptation, director, and actors” (Haniya [1958] 1979a, p. 230), he ended up cultivating a rare propensity that enabled him to remember almost everything he watched in this period with “a surprisingly precise memory” (Haniya 1957, p. 142). As a result, readers of Haniya’s film essays must be first astonished by his encyclopedic knowledge about old movie stars and directors. In *Dreaming in the Darkness*, Haniya cites D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), Abel Gance’s *La Roue* (1923), and Fritz Lang’s *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* (1924) as his prewar best films, while referring to Victor Sjöström, John M. Stahl, and Peter Brook as his favorite directors. When it came to movie stars, moreover, the degree of his cinephilia suddenly rose up and he paid the best tribute to a group of long-forgotten supporting actors, such as Richard Barthelmess, Betty Compson, and Patsy Ruth Miller (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, pp. 62–97).

Later, when a young Haniya set his sights on literature, he naturally developed a similar good knowledge of foreign authors and screenwriters. Not only did he memorize names of novelists through screen adaptation, but he often decided which film to watch according to the name of the person(s) who provided the screenplay. But this does not mean that Haniya remembered each film based on its story. As Haniya had once disclosed, “the overall plot of an old film is now blurred like an old sketch drawn with charcoal [. . .]. The overall structure of the film cannot be remembered just like a landscape that has already vanished” (Haniya 1957, p. 142). Instead, for Haniya, his film experience was no more than an accumulation of visual impressions composed of multi-layered artificial factors, including mise-en-scène, cinematography and camera movements, and a number of both editing and shooting techniques. With this in mind, Haniya spoke highly of the German cinematographer Karl Freund’s outstanding camerawork in F. W. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (1924). In reconstructing out of his memory the film’s most impressive shot in which a person from the second floor window calls out to the main character walking down the street and the camera rises steadily towards the window with no cuts and shows, through the said window, the main character entering the room, Haniya could not but help praise it as the epitome of both scientific and philosophical investigations in the 20th-century insofar

as it captured people's constant desire "to move from the inside of man to the inside of things" (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, p. 266).

Given the exceptional degree of such fond memories, it is obvious that Haniya, too, belonged to "the generation that reached its adolescence at a time when cinema had become the newest artistic attraction" (Sasaki 1957, p. 190). However, one would soon recognize that there was one major omission in his cinematic autobiography: despite his enthusiastic fascination with foreign films, he seldom talked about his encounter with Japanese films. Like the majority of Japanese boys at the time, Haniya enjoyed watching Onoe Matsunosuke's supernatural ninja films or Bandō Tsumasaburō's spectacular sword-fighting films. However, his interest in domestic film products came to an end as soon as he landed in Japan at the age of thirteen. As a consequence, when he was asked to contribute an article on two postwar films directed by Kinoshita Keisuke, Haniya made a surprising confession that it was the first time "in almost 20 years" that he watched Japanese films (Haniya [1958] 1979a, p. 230). It might be easy to dismiss this anecdote as merely reflecting Haniya's self-claimed obsession with Western culture. But even if this were the case, it is necessary to clarify what kind of political judgment was involved behind Haniya's indifference toward Japanese films.

It is often said that Haniya's literary works dealt with a specific thesis known as "a discontent with the law of noncontradiction" (*jidōritsu no fukai*). Originally developed by Greek philosophers, this law designates that a logically correct proposition cannot be true and false at the same time. In other words, it prohibits us to assume the same given object to be ("A is A") and not to be ("A is not A") at one and the same moment because it inevitably generates self-contradiction. Although this is no more than one of the most basic principles in logics, Haniya argued that it could also be a very inhumane process, especially when applied to one's own identity politics. As someone who spent his childhood in Taiwan, both Japan and the West appeared to him through film as both dreamy and remote places for yearning. But while Hollywood and European films taught him how to transgress national borders with imagination, Japanese films served only to fuel his contempt. Those domestic films always depicted Japanese movie stars as kind and heroic, but Haniya also witnessed from his own lived experience that those seemingly nice and respectful Japanese fellows suddenly became evil and cold-blooded colonizers whenever they confronted local Taiwanese people and communities³.

As a result, Haniya not only avoided Japanese films for the next twenty years but also began to separate himself from the law of noncontradiction. To him, a simple statement "I am I" (*ore wa ore da*) was already very problematic since this "I" is always determined both externally and retroactively, according to the predicates that specify Haniya's individual properties such as "am a man" or "am a Japanese." Therefore, even if he openly criticized the misconduct of Japanese colonizers in Taiwan, he would have still been identified as part of the same problematic Japanese as soon as he pronounced that simple statement "I am I" (Tsurumi 2005, pp. 184–85). At first, Haniya aimed to liberate himself from the constraints of nationalism and colonialism through his active commitment to the then-illegal Japanese communist party. But after he was arrested in 1932, Haniya began to shift his primary means for protest from a direct political action to developing his own vision of being in the world differently than the law of noncontradiction. Then, since his debut collection of aphorisms "*Credo, quia absurdum*" [*Fugōri yue ni ware shinzu*] (Haniya [1939] 1998a), Haniya promoted a new ontology that enabled him or any given objects to assume two or more different modalities at one and the same time, an ontology that is often expressed in the apparently self-contradictory formula, "A is at once A and not A" [*A wa A dearu to dōji ni hi-A dearu*]. As we will see shortly, Haniya came to write about film precisely because this modern medium offered him an alternative experience of being in the world beyond the law of noncontradiction.

In addition to his predilection for foreign films, Haniya's film theory was based on his exclusive interest in silent and black-and-white films. But again, this marked preference should be read less as a sign of nostalgia than as his firm resolution to offer a plausible

answer to the question “what is cinema?” Accordingly, Haniya points out that one of the unique strengths of film, which cannot be attained through literature or other forms of art, is that it can depict the overwhelming weight of “things” (*mono*) themselves in an extremely concrete and tangible manner. One such example can be found in Peter Brook’s 1960 black-and-white film *Moderato Cantabile*. According to Haniya, this work successfully disclosed to him the attraction of things by featuring those familiar but often-neglected objects such as “an abandoned wall in a dilapidated coffee shop”, “a riverbank at dusk as the lights start to come on”, and “a sightseeing boat gliding on a cold, cloudy river” (Haniya [1961] 1979b, p. 62).

That being said, it is incorrect to equate Haniya’s discussion here with the general disposition of the film medium to enhance its own reality-effect by adding new technologies like the talkie, color film, and 3D imagery. The following remark by Haniya clearly addressed the point in question:

The reason why we became so amused by film in our times stems not only from the tremendous efforts of directors and cinematographers to create a new world, but also from the fact that their films were made mostly silent and black-and-white. Black-and-white images do not disperse vision as much as color ones do. With color, impressions of external reality like “ah, they’re wearing a dress” or “that’s a house with a blue roof” become the reality of the audience’s inner world as such. But in black-and-white images, everything becomes an object [*buttai*] simply because there only exist black and white, including both humans and things. And what this object is thinking is unknowable because it doesn’t speak at all when appearing in a silent film. The dialogue only occasionally appears on the inter-titles, so the viewer must arbitrarily go deep into their own imaginations. (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, p. 102)

To speak about distinct properties of cinema from the perspective of silent and black-and-white films was not unique to Haniya, as proven in the work of classical film theorists like Hugo Münsterberg ([1916] 2001) and Rudolf Arnheim ([1932] 1957). Yet while those Western theorists defended the plasticity (*kasosei*) of the film medium by illuminating the substantial difference between reality and the world projected on screen, Haniya detected the most remarkable value of the same medium in the proximity (*zenkinsei*) between these two different realms. Thus, for Haniya, real advantage of silent and black-and-white film lies rather in a paradox that while they do bring to the fore the materiality of things in the world, it nonetheless cannot be the same material world as such because it still lacks color, sound, volume, texture, and other sensible properties. Consequently, film, especially when it is made silent and black-and-white, came to alter our normal vision of reality through what we could call the “ontological paradox”.

According to Haniya, most living creatures, including human beings, possess a specific biological instinct called “phototaxis” (*sūkōsei*) which forces them to turn their eyes to a source of light. But in order to take advantage of this *natural* instinct, cinema requires an *artificial* setting called a movie theater. In this darkened space, we as a viewer usually indulge in our “solitary dream”, rarely communicating with other audience members until the light is back at the end of the screening. Nevertheless, precisely because a stranger next to us is also immersed in a similar dream in the same space at the same time, “film possesses a sense of individual loneliness and that of collective experience at one and the same time” (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, p. 89). Similarly, although Haniya calls it a “solitary dream”, what we actually experience inside theaters is not random combinations of incoherent and absurd images, but a series of images that always narrates a story with some logical, emotional, and stylistic consistency. In this way, Haniya illuminates the inherently self-contradictory nature of the world disclosed on screen, deliberately giving it such tautological expressions as “a realistic fiction”, “a coherent daydream”, and “the fantasy that proceeds in a logical manner” (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, pp. 93, 150).

Moreover, we can also point out that technological principles of film as a medium are also based on the same ontological paradox. Inside the movie theater, we perceive a film first

and foremost as an accumulation of moving images. However, this very *movement* does not exist as it is, as an object that we can directly capture with our hands. What is recorded on film instead is nothing but a series of still photographs that do not move on their own, and when those immobile and instantaneous images are continuously projected on the screen at the right speed (normally 16 or 24 frames per second), our retina and cognitive system somehow misrecognize them as a continuous and self-generating movement. Consequently, if we define film through its psychological effects alone, we could definitely say that film does move and exist in front of us. But when it comes to the physical existence of what we actually see there (i.e., moving images), one must reach a reverse conclusion that film neither moves nor exist as such. I admit that one could still refer to the film strip as the material basis of our film experience, but to stress the point here again, what we see on the surface of the film strip is substantially different from what we experience on and through the screen.

To summarize, Haniya wrote about cinema precisely because it helped him develop a new ontology more suited to the actual situation of the 20th century. The premise of this new ontology was that it no longer premised itself on the traditional Cartesian dyads between subject and object, body and mind, essence and existence, noumenon and phenomenon, and most importantly, being and nonbeing. It is in this context that one could effectively compare Haniya with his Western counterparts like Bazin and Kracauer, given their mutual and coeval attempts to answer the question “What is cinema?” from a genuinely philosophical perspective. This increased sense of synchronicity can be proven further by a massive influx of Japanese students and scholars who visited Europe in the interwar period to study the latest trends in Western philosophy—including phenomenology and existentialism—under the supervision of such internationally renowned thinkers as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre⁴.

Although Haniya himself did not visit Europe until the late 1960s, he was still able to catch up with those philosophical trends through his critical reading of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). Arguably the most influential philosopher in the first half of 20th-century Japan, Nishida not only developed his own system of thought in response to the work of contemporary Western thinkers like William James and Henri Bergson but squarely challenged traditional Western philosophy and its centuries-long reliance on Cartesian dualism with a series of self-contradictory concepts including “active intuition” [*kōiteki chokkan*], “the continuity of discontinuity” [*hi-renzoku no renzoku*], and “the self-identity of absolute contradiction” [*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*] (Nishida [1925] 2012). Seen in this light, it can also be said that Haniya’s long-neglected writings on cinema also have a great potential to relocate the historical development of Japanese film theory within the broader context of the global circulation of ideas in the last century beyond the very schematic geopolitical divide between the West and the non-West.

3. From Film’s (Non-)Existence to Being in General

Up to this point, I have depicted Haniya solely as an insightful film theorist. But we now must return to the original question that had initially prompted our present inquiry: Why Haniya, as a novelist and thinker, found it necessary to explicate the ambiguous (non-)existence of film as a medium? Aside from his personal affection for old films, what motivated and sustained his border-crossing transgression? In response to these predictable questions, Haniya offered the following remark in his 1957 article entitled “The Uncanniness of Film” [*Eiga no bukimisa*]: Films, he said, often contain “a piercing moment in which our form of being is made explicit” (Haniya [1957] 1998f, p. 304) and, for this reason, to write about the darkness that serves as the ontological support of film’s paradoxical existence as moving pictures would equally mean “to write about a considerable part of our mental state” (Haniya 1957, p. 133). As is well known, Martin Heidegger aimed to elucidate the meaning of Being in general through his “temporal-existential” analysis of the being of Dasein, a mode of existence that is both peculiar and experiential to us as humans (Heidegger [1927] 1996). Haniya then alertly updated this famous philosophical enquiry by

adding film as an alternative point of reference. For Haniya, the technical advantage of this modern device was not limited to the fact that it has its own form of being. He found it important precisely because it enabled him to better reflect on the actual and ever-shifting mode of his own existence through experience.

Not surprisingly, the issue of Dasein—how we as humans exist in this world—set one of the main themes of Haniya’s literary work. And one could easily confirm this through his writing method known as “reductive realism” (*kangenteki riarizumu*). Though called “realism”, this method did not offer objective and truthful descriptions of social life. Rather, it aimed “first to reduce each material that consists of our everyday to its substance. Then, conversely, it moves on to reassemble each reduced part into a [new] shape in which all the elements are tied and supporting each other tightly by means of a very strong adhesive, namely, with a ‘realism of contemplation.’ In this way, it ultimately leads to a singular reconstruction of the whole” (Haniya [1955] 1998d, pp. 510–11).

I admit that this account might not be clear enough, so let me cite Haniya’s 1948 short story entitled “Consciousness” [*Ishiki*] to exemplify his notion of reductive realism further. In this text, Haniya depicts a story about the young male protagonist seriously concerned with the form and meaning of his own existence. One day, he happens to find the key to answering this cumbersome ontological question by engaging in the following experiment with his own eyes:

I suddenly pushed my eyeballs hard when my eyelids were closed. I continued to press them so hard that they sank deep into my recessed eye sockets. I became anxious. . . . Even still, I kept pressing my eyeballs. Then, amidst the steep darkness, a small white star suddenly appeared. When I gazed at this tiny dancing white spot for the first time, I originally thought that that eternal scar hidden inside my lens had, for some functional reason I couldn’t comprehend, stumbled and wavered before me. However, I was wrong. It was a light, an eternally self-transforming light as such. (Haniya [1948] 1998c, p. 195)

Through this painful visual experiment, the protagonist comes to understand that “a glow or light that radiates from itself” does exist “inside my dark field of vision” (Haniya [1948] 1998c, p. 196). It must be easy to interpret this spontaneous light as a metaphor for the “consciousness” after which this story was titled. Yet more important for us here is that the protagonist’s awakening to his ego or subjectivity or inner self took place in a both artificial and paradoxical darkness in which he was forced to see without opening his eyes. A few days later, when looking at the face of a goldfish raised by a woman in a brothel, the protagonist discovers that fish does not have eyelids and therefore remains unaware of its consciousness. To put it another way, he now realizes that the very existence of our own consciousness is contingent upon the simple biological fact that we, as humans, do have eyelids that serves as a membrane between mind and body, inside and outside, and essence and existence. Haniya goes on to write:

If there were no eyelids that hold the darkness and light within, perhaps this consciousness of mine would not exist as is. It could never be like this. Yes, without that lid, my consciousness must have been identical with the consciousness of the goldfish that only keeps reflecting the outside world—I cried this out in my heart, and when I cried it out abruptly, I felt as if I had made a terrifying discovery that I couldn’t recognize before. (Haniya [1948] 1998c, p. 205)

This is how Haniya dealt with his notion of reductive realism. Here, an object or a phenomenon called “consciousness” is drastically reduced to its underlying elements, and then, with his sophisticated literary arrangement, it reconstitutes itself as something new, something that could help us better address the meaning and shifting conditions of “being in the world” in the 20th century. However insightful, it seems difficult to adopt this strategy unless you are a writer who, just like Haniya and Dostoevsky, devotes his or her entire life and creative energy to proving that literature can be a legitimate domain of metaphysics. Nevertheless, as Haniya reminded us, even those of us who are completely

lacking such noble literary instinct could still make up for such deficiency by watching films in the darkness of the movie theater.

As we have already seen, Haniya's film theory had initially highlighted the ontological paradox of the film medium, its oxymoronic mode of existence that deliberately nullifies the clear-cut distinction between being and nonbeing. He now changes his approach by shifting the focus to the actual function of the same medium, that is, by asking how film's ambiguous being would help us to deepen or renew our understanding of the world and its mode of existence. It is here that one could provide a more credible account of Haniya's life-long obsession with silent and black-and-white films. According to Haniya, one of the most remarkable features of the film medium is that it often serves as a kind of simulation apparatus, a device that enable us to experience "this multi-dimensional world" in "the most primitive forms of dualist thinking, such as light vs. darkness, motion vs. stillness, and truth vs. falsehood" (Haniya [1961] 1979b, p. 61). This is the process Haniya would call "cinematic reduction", and it deliberately turns whatever it projects on screen into a shadow of the shadows, or a negation of the negation, through its bold rearrangement of the things or phenomena that we had long been familiar with in our everyday life.

Haniya then took a step further to investigate how film could transform our conception of Dasein, the way in which we as humans exist in this world. To proceed with this central task, Haniya paid special attention to the specific cinematic effect known as *identification*. Although I call it identification, what is at stake here is not the indirect and imaginative attachment of the viewers with the fictional characters on screen, but the more direct and physical unification between the audience members and the cinematic apparatus as such. Recapitulating the basic fact that we as humans cannot help but turn our gaze to the spontaneous light reflecting from the screen, Haniya presented his peculiar definition of cinematic identification as follows:

While we look at a screen in the dark, it gives us the feeling that we exist separately from the screen in front of us. But the truth is that a spectator sitting in the dark can be nothing but a camera that has a very sensitive film strip on one end of this dark box and a lens that lets the white light shine on the other end. We feel as if we become the dark interior of a gigantic camera obscura that expanded into a space with the exact same size of a movie theater and take a deep breath there. (Haniya 1957, p. 135)

This means that in watching a film, we identify ourselves with a non-human perceiving subject called the camera and then, as its outcome, acquire an alternative standpoint from which to scrutinize our own being in the world, effectively surpassing the schematic but no less persistent divisions between subject and object, mind and body, and noumenon and phenomenon. Under Haniya's scrutiny, each film viewer is always compelled to become the examiner *and* the examined at one and the same time.

Like the film medium itself, our existence in the movie theater qua camera obscura is full of paradox. When watching a film there, our body is usually bound to a cramped seat and unless there are some special circumstances, we do not move or change our physical location. In the meantime, our mind, now preoccupied with the moving images projected on screen, continues to change its imaginary location along with the camera movement or when a shot is cut and followed by another. Or, thanks to a special editing technique which the advocates of Soviet montage theory called "creative geography", our mind can travel around the world in just a few seconds, or it even becomes possible to create a purely fictional and non-existent space where, say, the Statue of Liberty, the Red Square, and Mt. Fuji stand next to each other (Pudovkin 2006, pp. 70–71). With the advent of the space age, furthermore, the space that our mind could explore through our identification with the camera was increasingly enlarged. Haniya praised this ongoing development by saying: "I wish [someone] will throw the camera out of the spaceship that goes to the unknown edge of our galaxy beyond Pluto" (Haniya and Ogawa 1982, p. 153).

The limitation and expansiveness of the filmic space, which exists both in a specific place (movie theater) and somewhere else (location site or fictional space) at one and the

same time, appropriately help us examine yet another complicated relationship between *being* and *time*. In the aforementioned “The Uncanniness of Film”, Haniya refers to his past experience that when a cheerful, middle-aged actress appearing on screen was about to tap another character with her hand, her lively image suddenly became frozen and then completely vanished due to the malfunction of the projector. This incident—which must be familiar to those who frequented revival theaters—left him with a “terrifying impression that a calm and inorganic matter both suddenly and cruelly dominated her entire life-form as soon as I found it appearing on that middle-aged actress” (Haniya [1957] 1998f, p. 306). As a result, he came to learn “a kind of terror that represses our voice even if we try to scream” and “an abominable uncanniness that surrounds the thing-in-itself [*monojitai*]” (Haniya [1957] 1998f, pp. 306–7). Although film is usually referred to as a medium of animation, giving life and movement to actors originally captured in the form of still photographs, it could equally reveal the finitude of their physical existence, their being as a thing (*mono*) as such, when it abruptly stops its self-rotating movement. In this sense, what Haniya meant by the term *uncanny* was less the dualistic division between life and death than the ghostly and self-conflicting realm that exists between being and nonbeing.

In the meantime, Haniya also referred to another anecdote in which an old famous actress from the bygone era goes to a movie theater and confronts her younger self on and through the screen (Haniya [1957] 1998f, p. 304). This implies that the specific being known as human could obtain *eternal* life as long as their images are captured and inscribed on the film strip. Like the film itself, this new being cannot exist in any perceptible manner unless it gets *animated* through the self-rotating movement of the cinematic apparatus. And even if the very medium we use for filmmaking has already shifted from analogue to digital, from the photographic image to the digital data stored on the computer, we could still claim our continuous existence as long as we stand in front of the camera and record any sensible traces of our own. Furthermore, once we become such a cinematic (non-)being, we could continue to survive not only after our own biological death but even after a particular species known as “human beings” becomes extinct. Here is what Haniya envisioned:

Someday ruins of death and extinction will come and silence all the murmurous noises remaining on this planet. What would happen if for some reason a projector begins rolling in the empty, dark, and quiet inside space of a movie theater left somewhere in this soundless world? While the film casts some whitish images on screen, there is no responding squeak from the silence of the ruins where no one is watching; only characters inside the picture plane are moving around on the screen without making sound. In this moment, my whole body was gripped by an uncanny fear that [in this futuristic setting] I would be no longer able to let my voice out, sitting there and silently looking up at the screen as a formless, transparent spirit. (Haniya 1957, pp. 138–40)

Haniya called this beautiful yet frightening vision an “Illusion of the Ruins”. But even if this vision itself was inspired by a never-ending chain of war and destruction throughout history, did he express his despair alone? Haniya’s answer must be “no”, for this apocalyptic vision also implied our possible encounter with the unknown in the future. In the early 20th century, the writer Georges Duhamel regretfully confessed that “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (Duhamel 1930, p. 52)⁵. With Haniya, we should read this apparently negative statement against the grain, by treating what Duhamel considered to be a disadvantage of the film medium as its own advantage. Cautiously blurring former categorical divisions between essence and existence, subject and object, reason and experience, word and image, and being and nonbeing, film is full of possibilities to advance an entirely new mode of communication even with those who happen to land on the earth hundreds of millions of years after the total extinction of ourselves.

4. Rehistoricizing Haniya's Ontological Film Theory

Haniya's "Illusion of the Ruins" is remarkable in that it was presented not as a conclusion of his long commitment to film writing, but as its starting point in "Notes on Old Films", his seemingly anachronistic contribution to *Literary Film Theory*⁶. This means that it is necessary to relocate Haniya's ontological film theory in the discursive context of late 1950s Japan again. As I have pointed out, Haniya's film theory was inseparable from his profound dissatisfaction with the law of noncontradiction, and therefore it first and foremost intended to bring to light the very paradoxical nature of our own "being in the world" in the 20th century by scrutinizing the equally self-contradictory existence of the film medium. Here, one could easily recognize the strong influence of Heideggerian existential phenomenology. Interestingly, however, Haniya's approach had also much in common with that of Hanada Kiyoteru, another key contributor to *Literary Film Theory*. This is not to simply say that they consciously formed a close alliance with one another in the immediate postwar period through their mutual participation in the literary magazine called *Kindai bungaku* [Modern Literature], as well as in avant-garde art organizations like the "Night Society" [*yoru no kai*], rather, Haniya and Hanada had pursued very similar philosophical issues at least until they parted from each other at the end of the 1950s due to their different political reactions to Nikita Khrushchev's critique of Stalin's personality cult. Indeed, like Haniya's concept of the "discontent with the law of noncontradiction", Hanada developed an apparently self-conflicting logic of a dialectic under the slogan "to integrate opposites as opposites" [*tairitsubutsu wo tairitsu no mama tōitsu suru*].

In a series of essays compiled immediately after the war as *The Spirit of the Renaissance* [*Fukkō-ki no seishin*], Hanada examined a group of European thinkers and artists during the transitional periods from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and from the Renaissance to the modern period, focusing on their undeniably self-conflicting, if not schizophrenic, activities such as Copernicus's preoccupation with mathematics and poetry, François Villon's pursuit of the obscene and the sacred, and Edgar Allan Poe's depiction of the portrait that is at once dead and alive. To illustrate their internal conflicts more concisely, Hanada referred to the "ellipse" [*daen*] as a metaphor. Needless to say, the ellipse is a figure that is formed when the sum of the distances from the two focal points at the center on a plane to all the points on the curve is equal and constant. But it was also used by Marx in his *Capital* to explain the paradoxical process of the metamorphosis of money into commodity because, as he said, the ellipse is "a form of motion which, allowing this contradiction to go on, at the same time reconciles it" (Marx [1867] 1909, p. 116). Thus, for Hanada, the ellipse embodies the very state of self-contradiction in which we are asleep while awake, crying while laughing, and believing while doubting (Hanada 1977a, p. 395). Not surprisingly, Hanada's strategical stance here—which I would call a *dialectic without synthesis*—served as one of the major theoretical frameworks for the development of postwar Japanese avant-garde art movements in conjunction with the painter Okamoto Tarō's equally influential concept called "Polarism" [*taikyoku shugi*] (Okamoto [1948] 2011)⁷.

Given this brief summary, no one would fail to grasp the striking affinity between Haniya and Hanada. But nothing can explain their intellectual collaboration better than their mixed reactions to the work of Nishida Kitarō. It is well known that Hanada was fully mesmerized by Nishida when he was a student at Kyoto University in the early 1930s and even made a reference to this Japanese philosopher in his debut work "Flag" [*Hata*] (Hanada [1938] 1977c). But Hanada soon became aware of the downside of Nishida's philosophy, insofar as it ended up offering what Hanada called "absolute dialectic", a dialectic that casually synthesizes the opposites by making very awkward phrases such as "one qua many" or "being qua nonbeing". In particular, Hanada problematized Nishida's regressive attitude that always aimed to reduce ellipses into a series of concentric circles with the single center, to sublate a thesis and an antithesis into the unifying synthesis, without paying any serious attention to the actual struggles between the opposites (Hanada [1949] 1977b, p. 26). To counter Nishida's inclination toward the Leibnizian concept of "preestablished harmony", Hanada deliberately adopted a different theory of dialectics developed by Lenin.

“The unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites”, said Lenin, “is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as the development and motion are absolute” (Lenin [1925] 1975, p. 649).

Similarly, Haniya was not only indebted to Nishida’s philosophy but also expressed his decisive departure from it in his 1948 novella “An Impromptu Speech” [*sokuseki enzetsu*] (Haniya [1948] 1998b). What is notable in Haniya’s early career is that he, unlike Hanada, first encountered Lenin as a politician and not as a philosopher per se. An anarchist inspired by Max Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* (1844), the young Haniya attempted a personal “struggle” against Lenin by attacking his commitment to state-building explicated in *The State and Revolution* (1917). But precisely because he was completely defeated by Lenin after reading the book, Haniya decided to join the Japanese Communist Party and engaged in the peasant liberation movement until he was arrested in March 1932 on charges of blasphemy and violation of the Peace Preservation Law [*Chian iji hō*] (Haniya [1956] 1998e, p. 20). It was during his imprisonment that Haniya started studying philosophy more thoroughly than before. More than anything, he became preoccupied with Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially with the section that addresses the issues of “the transcendental dialectic”, a common but no less self-conflicting or illogical tendency of the reason to give account to intrinsically unknowable objects and phenomena including “the existence of the God” or the extent of “the universe as a whole” (Kant [1781/1787] 1999). Through this process of self-learning, Haniya gradually developed his own notion of “discontent with the law of noncontradiction” and presented its main formula—A is at once A and not A—from his debut work “*Credo, quia absurdum*” onward.

Despite these similar backgrounds, Haniya and Hanada substantially differed from each other in their contrasting engagement with the Japanese Communist Party. While Haniya always kept himself apart from the party after his imprisonment, Hanada joined the party after the war and remained very active as its major mouthpiece throughout the 1950s. It is true that Hanada’s presence as a party member was rather unusual, as he either reinterpreted socialist realism as a legitimate theory for avant-garde art or tried to defend and rescue Stalin against the critique of his personal cult. But in Haniya’s view, Hanada’s commitment to the party appeared problematic in that it failed to recognize how the party exists, how it sustains its own being by violently eliminating reactionary or discontented elements. How could it be possible, then, to “integrate opposites as opposites” in the realm of actual politics? Is it possible to be a communist while not being a member or even a supporter of the communist party?

With these questions in mind, Haniya wrote a series of political essays at the same time as he started writing about film through his contribution to *Literary Film Theory*. In these political essays, Haniya adopted an unmistakably speculative standpoint from which to reinterpret Trotsky’s famous notion of “permanent revolution” as a process of constant self-reflection on the shifting forms and meanings of “being political” in his own times, in the context of the Cold War regime and Japan’s rapid economic growth (Haniya [1956] 1998e). Not surprisingly, the JCP and its followers dismissed these essays as metaphysical nonsense. But we should never overlook the fact that Haniya’s seemingly “abstract” and “apolitical” take on the current political situation did serve as a major inspirational source for a group of angry and disobedient youths who deliberately separated themselves from the party and called themselves the New Left [*shin-sayoku*] in organizing a series of massive protests against the renewal of the US–Japan security treaty toward the end of the 1950s. To borrow the words of Matsuda Masao once again, Haniya’s political essays from this period “were very well read by student activists at the time as a systematic book on politics. There was still no such thing as “internal strife” (*uchi geba*) and it was still a time when such a situation had not yet arrived. But in foreseeing its future realization to some extent, Haniya discussed a kind of ideal politics, ideal left-wing politics, and ideal revolutionary politics” (Matsuda 2004, pp. 215–16).

With his timely attempt to make use of the critical vocabulary of existentialist phenomenology to answer the question “what is cinema?”, Haniya and his ontological film

theory appears before us an illuminating example of the active and informed contributions of Japanese intellectuals to the global circulation of ideas in the last century. However, it should be noted that his writings from the late 1950s in general more specifically challenged people's common and persistent tendency to treat philosophy as a pure antithesis to politics, and vice versa. To put it in the similarly vacillating discourse of Marxism at the time, in those essays Haniya consciously tried to establish a new political subject, a subject that no longer trusts and reproduces a series of binary divisions between knowing and being, theory and practice, base and superstructure, party leaders and nameless masses, and finally, between Stalinism and American Imperialism. Unlike Hanada, Haniya did not exert a perceptible influence on his contemporary Japanese filmmakers. Nevertheless, his intellectual legacy, his unflinching attempt to subvert whatever we had uncritically considered to be normative or non-contradictory, set the future direction of Japanese film criticism in and around 1968, where people tried to alter or even revolutionize everything related to the capitalist modes of production, circulation, and reception of film and other related mass communication media⁸.

This observation also enables us to answer our last remaining question: What makes it relevant and worthwhile to study such a minor, past, and non-Western film theorist as Haniya now? One may argue that his perceptive treatment of film as a *ghostly* medium would advance our ongoing discussion on digital imagery and its very elusive and immaterial form of existence. Others would maintain that his ontological writings could be instrumental to enrich the newly emergent subfield called "film-philosophy". So far so good, but we should also be wary of the downside of these apparently positive assessments. For, if we simply ended up registering Haniya as a mere late comer to the pantheon of canonical film theorists, nothing would change regarding the problematic discursive constitution of Anglo-American film and media studies as an academic discipline. In other words, praising Haniya based solely on the already established criteria for a good theorist is not effective enough to dispel a series of gender, racial, and geopolitical biases that still sustain our conventional understanding of theory as an exclusive domain of the West.

Therefore, I would rather argue that the real advantage of Haniya's intervention lies in its potential to liberate ourselves from our intuitional indulgence in such possibly outdated dualistic thinking. Why, for instance, are names of non-Western or global south theorists still largely absent in our classrooms despite the discipline's general and tenacious call for globalization? How could we turn the usual conflicts between production and critical studies in our film programs into something more rewarding and productive? If, as D. N. Rodowick reminds us, what we consider to be the Western canon of classical film theory were presented mostly in non-theoretical forms of writings, such as film reviews, poetic essays, and written manifestos, what alternative notions of theory were at work in the first half of the last century and how did they transform themselves after the establishment of film studies as an academic discipline from the 1970s onward? (Rodowick 2014). As long as these urgent issues remain unsolved, we can still learn a lot from Haniya's ontological essays. Put differently, there is no better way to assess Haniya's theoretical invention than to use it as a guide to both critically and constantly reflect on our own commitment to the production and dissemination of knowledge through an equally elusive and self-contradictory being called *theory*.

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Notes

- ¹ For Hanada's influence on Matsumoto and Teshigahara, see [Tomoda \(2012\)](#) and [Furuhata \(2013\)](#).
- ² According to Haniya, this remark was originally made by the famous political thinker Maruyama Masao.
- ³ For more on Haniya's early days in Taiwan, see [Tsurumi \(2005\)](#).
- ⁴ I gave a detailed account of these transcontinental colloquations in my own monograph. See [Yamamoto \(2020\)](#), especially Chapter 5.
- ⁵ This statement became well-known as it was cited in Walter Benjamin's famous "The Work of Art" essay ([Benjamin \[1936\] 1968](#), p. 238).
- ⁶ What I emphasize here is that Haniya's film writing did not follow a usual linear progression. His reference to old silent and black-and-white films, too, equally appeared in his first film essay ("Notes on Old Films") and the last one (*Dreaming in the Darkness*). Although Haniya wrote several essays on contemporary Japanese filmmakers like Ōshima Nagisa around the turn of the 1970s, his moviegoing became less and less often in the following decade as he developed a cataract. Nevertheless, there was one last memorable encounter between Haniya and film in the last days of his life. A few years before he died on 19 February 1997, at the age of 87, Haniya made an appearance in Hara Kazuo's 1994 documentary film *A Dedicated Life* (*Zenshin shōsetsuka*). Thanks to this film, we can still see him alive and well on the screen of whatever devices we use today to watch movies, as if he became an eternal cinematic (non-)being just like the cheerful middle-aged actress he referred to in his "The Uncanniness of Film".
- ⁷ According to Okamoto, avant-garde art movements in 1920s Europe were composed of two polarized tendencies, namely, the rational but nonfigurative expressions of abstract painting and the irrational but concrete expression of Surrealism. His concept of "Polarism" aimed to invent a new form of visual representation not by synthesizing these two positions, but rather by deliberately intensifying the conflict between the two ([Okamoto \[1948\] 2011](#)).
- ⁸ For more on Japanese film criticism in the late 1960s, see [Yamamoto \(forthcoming\)](#).

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