

Rei Hayama: Update Technology, Update Story, Update Animism

Animistic Apparatus: A Gathering

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The fact that we, living in Asia, are now thinking about animism makes me imagine that we have lost our way, that we need to rethink the footsteps we have taken, and there is a certain sense of elation, but also a certain sense of devastated and crisis. As we retrace our old steps, we may feel nostalgic for old customs and beliefs. We may try to wake up something that has been lying dormant. But perhaps what is more important is, why do we need to rethink animism now?

In terms of practice, I would like to start by talking about the two visual mediums I have used so far: film and video. This is a very familiar clue to thinking about animism, as when we talk about art we often use the word "medium" to refer to the stones, woods, paints, our bodies and plants we use for our expression.

More than ten years ago, I used to shoot and develop films, making films mainly by "hand." I was fascinated by the unexpected interventions that occur in this visual medium, the superimposition of time on material image itself, the naturalness of the medium, like a rock being slowly chipped away by the ocean waves. I was fascinated by the certain weakness of the film and its uncontrollable nature somewhat living thing. However, due to the major shifting of the film industry and some of the problems that came with it.

Around 2014, I had already stopped developing film at home and moved to digital filmmaking, except when I used film in a way that I don't need to develop it. I felt that the kind of animistic quality of the image that I felt when I was using film then disappeared. To take an extreme and obvious example, I could shoot with a film camera without its lens, but if I did the same to a video camera, the screen would show "error" and the camera would automatically turn off. This was because digital works exactly as it was designed, and there was no chance for anything alien to sneak in. Compared to film, digital seems to be heading in the direction where everything is controlled by the human being, which somehow feels not free.

I want to emphasize that my aim here is not to argue against technological progress. However, it is true that human being can have mixed feelings about new technology, not only to the video camera but in many other aspects. What did I miss when I changed the medium to express? Where is my complex emotion coming from? As I thought back to the days I was using film, shooting on film was more laborious than video, and each step of the process had an obvious relationship to natural phenomena. Also, there was a special time during the film development. You could

hear the sound of water in total darkness, smell the chemicals in steam, and feel the gradual emergence of images that you actually could not see. As I mentioned earlier about film's being is like "a rock being slowly chipped away by the ocean waves...", the using film material is a practice of experiencing the world in where we are living. It was an animistic way of connecting with non-human existence too.

(As an aside, I would like to add one short note on an interesting animistic topic: while I was using film, I often heard rumors that there was something (a spirit) in the darkroom. Such rumors were often heard in the darkrooms at the university, in the film labs around Tokyo and in the independent labs in other oversea country).

I have to add something to what I said earlier about digital as it seems to be heading in the direction where "everything is controlled by the human being". If I ask myself "Is it possible for human to control of everything in this dark universe?", I do not think it is possible. But the eerie thing about the digital is that, without power or anything else, it "seems" possible for it to sever itself from every other existence on the planet and create a world of its own. In terms of this inner world alone, it would not be impossible for human to be in control of everything. But that doesn't mean that human can live with the joy of life in a story where everything is controlled by human. I have never done anything with the intention of "practicing animism," but in my daily life I often feel as if plants and animals transmit a message to me, or when I see a forest or the sea, I feel myself not as a human being but as just one being on the earth.

Therefore, I imagine that an animistic sensibility is not something that is inherently trendy, nor is it something that someone can teach you how to do. Animism is supposed to be something unconscious. As we live on this planet, we encounter non-human beings and learn from the countless fluid relationships between ourselves and them. And perhaps animism itself is a kind of narrative that naturally emerges from a human heart that cares for non-human beings. Animals, plants, natural phenomena/ Spirits, paranormal phenomena, extraterrestrial life, robots/non-human...

When I think of the folk tales and mythical stories that have been passed down through the ages, from a time when human wrestled with the richness of the earth's nature, I am reminded of the obvious, but often forgotten, fact that even those stories told by human with deep insights into nature are still stories created by human from a human perspective. Therefore, when non-humans and humans interact in an animistic way, humans must have unilaterally "imposed" some kind of role or function on non-humans in a sense.

So, in the age of global warming and mass extinction, what role will human require non-human in the stories we tell? And how can human interpret these ancient tales today? I do not intend to provide answers to these questions, but I would like to mention the importance of thinking about those questions. The complex feelings I felt when I have changed from film to digital, and the explore that began from there, taught me once again that humans are not independent of the place where we live and all that surrounds us. The immediate trigger for my decision to stop self-developing film was the problem of "chemical liquid waste disposal."* It was no coincidence that I was faced with a microcosm of the environmental problems of the earth when film-related facilities and services were disappearing one by one, warning me that the act of expression and art is also connected to the social structure and the environment of the earth.

Human beings cannot create things or express without a relationship with non-human beings. So even if we cannot escape the fact that our stories are from the human point of view, we must be careful not to lose our compassion for non-human beings. We must remain vigilant lest not only human beings, but all non-human beings, suffer. Perhaps that is why we feel the need to remind ourselves now of the effects, apparatus of animism.

Lastly, I attach three photos, which I took today after revisiting the place where I buried Tanuki (Asian raccoon dog) that died in a car accident in March 2021. In the stories of the people who developed agricultural techniques in old Japan, this wild animal was described as a "bad guy" who ate the crops in the fields and was often given a greedy and mean character. Even today, the raccoon dog is often portrayed as an "obese" or a "drunkard" when in fact it is not, as in the famous Shigaraki porcelain raccoon dog figurines. In today's human society, raccoon dogs are something marginalized and vulnerable. This is where I feel the need to update the story. With those photos, I confess one thing what's deep down in my heart: I wish I didn't even have to think or talk about animism!

Every time I say the word "animism," I feel the mixed emotions of calling out the name of something that will disappear after I call it by its name. It would be a relief if one day this text about animism were to disappear like a message in the sand, lost in the wind or rain. It seems to me that animism requires a lightness of touch, a quick return to a part of nature. When I think about it, I feel that I am not even qualified to talk about animism, as I was using film developer chemicals and the laptop which I am typing right now cannot return to nature easily.

*In the suburbs of Tokyo, where I live, it was very difficult to access a liquid waste disposal company, even though developer chemicals are easily available. It is both time-consuming and expensive to commission an individual to do so, and although

there is some suspicious information that tells it is no problem if you dilute small amount of wasted chemical with a large amount of water and gradually poured into the sewer. But the wasted chemical is containing silver after development. It cannot be poured directly into the sewer!