Film on the Faultline

Edited by Alan Wright

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A portion of the royalties for this book will be donated to the relief fund for the earthquake in Nepal.


Maria Buratti, “Borgi e sobborghi. Il paesaggio extrarurbano tra stereotipa e perdita d’identità,” in *Atlante del cinema italiano*, 89 (italics in the original).


For examples of these activities, Settis refers also to Ferruccio Sansa, *La colata. Il partito del cemento che sta cancellando l'Italia e il suo futuro*, Milan: Chiarelettere, 2010.


A number of contributions (and film reviews), included in Alessandro Bignami ed., *I Cacciatori di Aquilani*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010, expand upon the same uneasiness. See also the booklet included in the *Dragulia*’s DVD box set.


Inattentiveness in these and other films is the danger, as exemplified by the symptomatic failures of the sympathetic, yet unemployed film-maker in Carlo Mazzacurati’s *La Passione (The Passion)*, 2010. Although by profession he is supposed to know how to look and pay attention to the world around him, his disregard for much-needed hydraulic repairs to his vacation condo, located in the heart of the Tuscan hills, ends up damaging the affresco of the adjacent church, and provokes the local administrators to voice a simple, but most eloquent complaint: “This is a proper village, a community, not an automatic teller machine!”
The sheer scale of damage wrought by a massive natural disaster, whether witnessed remotely or experienced first-hand, throws all standards of knowledge and belief into vertiginous disarray. Human life appears powerless before the indifferent force of nature. Causality and justice no longer seem to apply. This gap in comprehension, in which a ceaseless present engulfs past and future, is analogous to the fragile connection to memory and identity that a snapshot photograph can offer its viewer—a wedding portrait or an elementary school group photo, for instance. The dynamic of remembrance and recollection is further complicated if such photographs themselves appear in films involving natural disaster as is the case in a number of documentaries made in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of March 11th, 2011. How might cinema bridge the divide between memories of life before the quake and the barren reality that follows? Can film offer new ways for victims of disaster or sympathetic onlookers to conceive of cataclysmic events and to begin the work of reconstruction?

The invisible faultlines that determine the extent of damage in any large natural disaster are cultural, economic, and industrial as much as they are geological. The cinematic responses to Japan’s historic earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear catastrophe similarly reflect their time and place of origin. They are representative of a visual culture and consumer society unique in character but global in scope, and speak to how such events are now largely perceived and remembered, due in part to the availability of rapid mobile communication technology, transferable cinematic forms and the popularization of light, transportable image-capture devices. In what follows, I explore the roles that old and new forms of documentary media played during and after the Tohoku earthquake—amateur photo/video reportage, salvaged family photographs, traditional documentary film, and emerging personal cinema—and analyse the various modes of address, manipulation, exchange, and construction found in such material.

The recent proliferation of mobile photo, video, and text media raises the question of whether documentary film, as we know it in its popular or subversive forms, remains important in contemporary discourse. The circulation of digital imagery through the increasingly commercialized channels of online services now supplies a potential platform for previously unheard voices. Post-3.11 documentaries by Toshi Fujiwara, Yuki Kokubo, Yoju Matsubayashi, Koichi Omiya and Lucy Walker offer rich texts for investigation of the nature of contemporary documentary media and its function in the wake of disaster. In content, form and style, these films are especially reflexive and also exploit the medium’s
potential for the presentation of intercalated subjectivities. In addition to the pervasive depiction of "amateur" image-making and the preservation of domestic photography, these works often employ footage compiled from a wide variety of professional and non-professional sources, and, in some cases, have generated collaborative relationships between the film-makers and their subjects that severely complicate the notion of a film's primary author. The visualization of self and community occupies an important place in these films as well, as is evident in the widespread framing of photographs discovered in the landscape and salvaged from the rubble, or of a camera shielding the face of a "character" on screen. Such features exhibit a concern for the ways that photography and cinema offer a special means of perceiving and conceiving of the quake and its aftermath.

Given that these films themselves rely on advances in digital video, while the material photographs that they show, saved from the muddy fields of a past laid to waste, have been largely produced using superseded chemical processes, their relation, as presented by the films, proposes a clear irony. The ontological tension between digital and analogue photography is not without relevance here, as is the comparison between the efficacy of still or moving images as documentary evidence. This chapter, however, does not provide a definitive response to these problematic issues, nor does it present an exhaustive survey of post-3.11 documentaries; rather, it views this moment in Japanese non-fiction film as an opportunity for discovering something new and noteworthy about the cinematic medium itself as our technological means of storytelling, documenting and witnessing continue to change.

The magnitude 9.0 quake, one of the five strongest documented in world history (Associated Press 2011), struck off the north-eastern coast of Japan, triggering a massive tsunami and claiming nearly 16,000 lives while leaving more than 3,000 missing (National Police Agency of Japan 2012). The Tohoku earthquake (also referred to as the Great East Japan Earthquake or the Sendai earthquake) has become known colloquially as 3.11. The earthquake and flood instigated meltdowns at the Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) Fukushima Daini Nuclear Power Plant and emergency shutdowns at the Fukushima Daini plant, provoking the worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl. The surrounding areas were evacuated while concern for radioactive contamination spread throughout the entire country and beyond to Japan's neighbours and trading partners. Japan's status as a first-world country also insured that a multitude of images from the scene of destruction became instantly accessible. The protracted devastation provided a convincing portrait of what a twenty-first-century apocalypse might look like, especially in light of recent quakes in China, Haiti, Iran, Laos, New Zealand and Turkey. The resulting energy crisis, which produced power shortages in metabolises to the south, provoked a national outcry against the Japanese government and nuclear power industry. Frustration with traditional news outlets and the limited safety information that government officials made available to people in communities potentially affected by radiation led to the mobilization of social media to relay citizen reports and organize public demonstrations, as well as innovations such as the development of an online crowd-sourced radiation measurement network.¹ Anti-nuke demos protesting reliance on nuclear power surprised many who had not witnessed such popular action since the country's student movements of the 1960s. The international community had already been alerted to the power of social networking services (or "SNS" in Japan) in the months before the Tohoku earthquake. Social media had been implemented with considerable success in the recent revolution in Egypt as a crucial means of organizing political action and reporting clashes with the military to a global audience, leading to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11th, 2011. Such inventive, effective, and immediate actions in the face of social and natural disaster further call into question what traditional short or feature length documentary "film" has to offer in the contemporary environment of image and information saturation.

Audiences outside Japan will be most familiar with British film-maker Lucy Walker's The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom (2011), which was nominated for a US Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject). The film has been described by its makers as a "visual haiku." It packs significant rhetorical content into its forty minute running time, and introduces, in a condensed format, many of the qualities possessed by the feature length films that I will discuss. True to its title, The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom can be divided into two parts. Walker's film first documents the damage wrought by the earthquake and tsunami and the state of affairs during the initial stages of recovery by using pre-recorded material and interview footage; it then switches to a more poetic mode through the use of symbolic imagery (primarily the cherry blossom of the title), reflective interviews, and lyrical nature photography and cinéma vérité footage. The film opens with raw, low-quality video footage shot from a hill overlooking a town in the process of being engulfed by the tsunami. This extended clip presents a shocking human perspective of the tsunami, a rapidly progressing dark glacier of waste. Those who have made it to the hill cry out in disbelief as the wave covers the town. They shout encouragement to people seen helping elderly people from the nursing home below up to higher ground, running to the edge of the surging current as it advances towards them. In this moment of extreme danger, the film cuts to white, as we hear the ethereal acoustic and electronic tones of Moby's emotional score. The camera toys with rapturous sun flares as the film crossfades to soft-focus images of cherry blossoms shot from below in high-definition video. A water-colour painting of a cherry blossom tree, glimpsed from over the shoulder of an anonymous figure, is framed in mid-composition before the image fades back to a white screen that presents the film's title.² A young relief worker, the film's first interviewee, recounts her experience as she surveys her heavily damaged town from the same hill that the opening scene was shot from: "I can't believe it happened in real life." The sequences that follow mix interviewees' accounts of survival with footage of the devastation from a variety of professional and nonprofessional sources. They incorporate images captured by keitai-wielding (cell phone) citizens on the ground, aerial shots from helicopters, and TV news with overlaid text announcements. Waves barrel through town streets, floating houses collide, and flames ignite on the surface of the dirty water. In the aftermath, the unseen, unspooking camera crew interviews citizens surveying the damage to their homes, recuperating in shelters, or volunteering help. Walker returns
to brief portions of interviews throughout the course of the film, punctuated by montage sequences of landscape views as well as close-ups of items carried away from domestic spaces by the water and now strewn amongst the remaining detritus – toys and paintings, as well as dust-caked photographs and photo albums, even an unspooled roll of 35mm still photo film draped over a tree branch. Pausing from his task of sifting through layers of wreckage, a relief worker makes a brief comment: “I always save photos and gravestones, hoping the families will come along and find them.”

About halfway through the film, the focus shifts to a dialogue on the ephemerality of life (mono no aware) through the traditional symbol of the sakura (cherry blossom). A couple, who now live at a local shelter, yet return to their home during the day to begin repairs, notice the opening buds of a cherry tree in their yard. Leading the camera crew outside, they delight at this harbinger of spring. The soft-focus shots of cherry blossoms and the music which accompanied the film’s opening title sequence return before a cut to a torii gate (of Shinto shrines, emblematic of Japan’s indigenous animistic spiritual tradition), and decimated homes seemingly dropped from the sky onto a barren landscape, a painting of a cherry blossom tree standing upright among cluttered architectural remains, the twilight sky, military trucks driving along a road cleared through the wreckage, empty town streets, the sky (now at dusk), and a time lapse shot of a blooming cherry blossom. A strong link is established between the disaster and the cherry blossom through the poetic associations of montage, a connection that the following sequences develop further. Interviewees comment that the trees are traditionally believed to be house spirits, and serve as a symbol of the samurai warrior class, in addition to being invested with personal memories as a mark of the season. Images of people viewing cherry blossoms in peaceful public spaces are interspersed with reminders of the disaster, such as students from Minamisoma City asking for donations, announcements of subway service cutbacks to conserve the national power supply, an out-of-order escalator, and cherry blossom festivals cancelled out of respect for victims of the earthquake. This culturally significant flowering tree, which attracts many domestic and international tourists every spring as it blooms from southern to northern Japan, opened shortly after the quake in the Tohoku region, which would have received numerous sightseers if it were not for the desecrated landscape and the danger of radiation. As many observed who visited the north in the spring of 2011, the cherry blossoms were particularly beautiful that year.

Following a sequence in which interviewees comment on the special memories brought back by the reappearance of the cherry blossom each year, an extended montage presents images of families, friends, and people of all ages in parks taking pictures of the trees in full bloom, using all manner of photographic devices, from smartphones to hand-held digital point-and-shoots and prosumer SLRs. A chorus of disembodied voices accompanies these images and provides a stunning discourse of poetic associations. An older man, stopped on his bicycle, takes a picture with a flip-phone, two young women squeeze together to share a camera viewfinder, a young girl in an Eimo T-shirt lowers her phone after taking a shot, a toddler poses in front of a haney cam, and an unlikely trio, an old man and two teenage girls, hold their camera phones towards the sky in unison. A man says, “I understand why everyone takes photos of cherry blossoms. It’s not that you want the most beautiful pictures, but you want pictures you took yourself. It doesn’t matter if the pictures are blurry or out of focus.” A young girl states: “It looks different when you see it in the newspaper than with your own eyes. We take our own pictures because we want to keep what we’ve seen.” The film asserts the very practice of photography as a transformative tool of reflection and personal visualization throughout this sequence, just as the importance of the medium in preserving memory and identity was depicted in the attempts to salvage family photographs. It should be noted that photography plays a particularly important role in everyday life in Japan, and, although not a large country geographically, domestic tourism is very popular. That photography would figure prominently in times of emergency and their representation should come as no surprise.

The film ends once more at the site of the disaster now seen from the point of view of a witness who seeks to remember and record the event. With a camera framed over her face, and shot in close-up, the young relief worker from the beginning of the film gathers an image of the scene of destruction. The shutter clicks and the lens is lowered, revealing her expression; youthful and determined, as she looks out at the town, a new coastline encroaching in the distance: “The utility poles are being put back up and the cables are being reconnected.” Then, in close-up, she adds; “I want to take pictures of the town as they’re rebuilding it.” By communicating her ambitions, this compelling association of imagemaking and preservation along with the process of reconstruction implicates not only the film-making process, but also the myriad contemporary means of creating and experiencing documentary media.

The proliferation of personal photographic and cinematic media serves as a potential antidote to the authorized practices of film and news professionals, and offers those directly affected by the catastrophic events of 3.11 a means of telling their stories to distant observers and fellow sufferers alike. While increasingly conglomerated media companies can hardly claim to have produced a more democratic climate of journalism, followers of the news experience stories through nonprofessional mediators more and more. Even for those who did not experience the quake and its aftermath first-hand, the event was widely reported and recorded on amateur video on cell phones or other consumer video devices. While cellular service was disrupted in the affected areas, information spread through brief accounts punched into smartphone keypads or pixelated snapshots dispatched via blips of social media, and broadcast on Japanese news and international outlets. Aside from these new means of data accumulation, which change how traditional media institutions respond to quickly developing stories, such first-hand “accounts” also find their way into personal media streams, increasingly hybridized between professional and non-professional reporters and commentators.

John Burnham Schwartz reproduces this experience of first exposure in the chilling foreword to March Was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Meltdown.¹ Schwartz relates a seldom described but increasingly felt mode of media
exposure when he imagines someone unaware of the events of March 11th stumbling upon a “random clip on YouTube – digital, of course, and hauntingly crude. A ‘home movie,’ it used to be called” (Karashima and Luke 2012: xiii). What was the first piece of information from Japan’s triple disaster that you experienced? A headline or a note from friends or co-workers may have preceded the initial exposure, presenting a warning or producing an expectation. Schwartz sets the scene on a seemingly normal afternoon at Sendai Airport: his literary proxy watches the video as an unidentifiable rumbling sound grows louder and louder. Soon after, the tsunami’s wave appears:

A wall of water is surging past the terminal. It is a meter high – then, very quickly, two—washing baggage carts, a boarding ladder, a yellow car along its path.

Inside the terminal, screams can be heard now, above nature’s roar of destruction. People are running, though there is no place to go.

The footage does not so much end as stop.

The stories begin.¹

Many will relate to such an experience of horror and disbelief. In the weeks following the disaster, one could watch similar “home movie” clips as they surfaced alongside professional live news coverage and the barrage of disturbing developments regarding Japan’s largest earthquake on record. Schwartz references an actual event of the flooding of one of Japan’s major regional airports. The small act of taking a picture of that which is about to disappear, recording a video as final testament to a person or place, or rescuing a dirty photo album carried away by the waves is understandably imbued with new courage in the face of massive earthly devastation. Yet an image, as the product of disparate cultural investments, subject to overexposure and appropriation, can easily enable the fetishization of disaster. In addition to the agency of images, a camera also grants its handler a potentially dangerous state of agency. While photographic instruments of mediation provide people with the ability to index memories or anchor the imagination of personally un-lived realities, in the wrong hands the camera can justify intrusion into lives and cultures. A film addressing mass trauma such as The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom may communicate an inspirational message of rebirth and hope, but can the medium contribute substantively to the process of reconstruction?

The films discussed here foreground, in their alternating focus on people and place, how personal history is situated in a social and natural landscape. They engage with problems of cinematic form in the diverse idioms of nonfiction film, and their aesthetic choices carry political intentions. The films’ recurring depictions of amateur photography – still and cinematic – spotlight photography’s dual character as means of remembrance and creation, and provide a set of axial concepts about documentary’s role in a crisis, thereby expanding its function as surrogate eyes and ears on the battered and broken ground. How can cinema bridge the phenomenological, conceptual and emotional divide between memory and experience? How is recording, collecting, and presenting images of disaster justified? What replaces the stark disparity felt upon looking at a photograph in the world when looking at a photograph in a film?

Koichi Omiya’s The Sketch of Mujo (2011, “Mujo Sobyo”) offers many helpful examples. Premiering in Tokyo in June, 2011, it is regarded by many as the first documentary to be created (or completed) in the quake’s aftermath. Like many of the documentaries that explored the jagged wastelands left by the quake and tsunami – left mostly empty and lifeless due to fear of radiation – the film is something of a road movie. Omiya travels from place to place in Kasennuma, Miyagi prefecture, accompanying a doctor who can often be heard off camera and appears onscreen during a number of interviews. They encounter people gauging the damage to their homes and communities. Omiya, thus, presents viewers with an episodic survey of survivor accounts. The distinctive trucking shot of the 3.11 documentary, in which devastation unfurls laterally through flattened landscapes of rubble captured from a moving vehicle, is well-established in The Sketch of Mujo. Abé Markus Nornes relates this “common visual trope” to those of post-war Japan in a report from the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival held in October, 2011:

A key challenge for all these filmmakers is communicating the scale of the disaster before their very eyes. How does one express the incomprehensible vastness of the destruction and the suffering it implies? Half a century back, just west of here, crews of filmmakers faced the same dilemma — not to mention a similar landscape — in the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Back then, their strategy was the pan. They scanned the disaster from a fixed point. The first films about the atomic bombings are filled with such shots. Today, they have replaced the pan with the truck. Or more specifically, the car or bike.

Nornes locates one explanation for the difference in the technology being utilized in each historical moment: film cameras in the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, light consumer grade video cameras following 3.11. He notes that, while most of the 3.11 documentaries themselves feel like rough sketches, eschewing a tripod even when not filming from a moving vehicle, The Sketch of Mujo’s, along with work by Yoji Matsubayashi and Toshi Fujitaya, contains “strong photography and clean, creative sound editing.”

From the first scenes of the film, family photography plays an important role, and its recovery from a partially destroyed house provides the film with its initial moments of reflection and hope for new beginnings. Returning to the remains of her home, an elderly woman retrieves a photo album, and flips through the pages with her husband. “We walked a lot didn’t we?” she comments. He replies: “Yes, we did. Yes, I remember.” Over the pages of the album, we see a young boy grow up. “It’s our history.” She nods, and smiles painfully: “I guess […] It’s a new beginning. It all begins from here. We are coming to an end though. But I hope the young people will try to rebuild it.” The camera holds its view on the old woman as she looks into the distance and her emotions bubble up. “Just look at this […] What can
I say [...] I wonder [...] just how [...]" Omiya cuts to a ravaged landscape that serves as her motivated perspective. Twisted train tracks leading nowhere.

Later, Omiya arrives at a home damaged by the tsunami but miraculously intact, given that a large boat ran aground just feet away when the flood waters subsided. A teenager and her grandmother, both wearing protective medical face masks, are found inside cleaning. Photographs speckled with mud, mostly saved from storage on the second floor, are laid out together and framed in shaky high and low angle close-ups. They depict a young woman, perhaps this maternal guardian from years earlier. The grandmother describes the photos as "priceless," but then expresses her intention to leave the area since her family no longer relies on fishing for its livelihood, and disasters such as this one, whether large or small, will inevitably occur again. "But I love the sea!" the young woman protests, and the camera pans over to her. "Yes. We all love the sea. That's why we live here." replies the grandmother. "I love the sea. I'd want to stay here, you know." She laughs shyly, seemingly embarrassed, and the film cuts back to the same view of the girl, now looking off in contemplation. She speaks as if asked, "What do you love about the sea?"; "When the sun shines on it, the sea just looks gorgeous. And the fish! I love jogging by the sea. Near the sea." In close-up, she continues: "You really should live near the sea." She looks back to her grandmother, then down, nods in self-assurance and looks off into the distance, then down again, noticeably conscious of the camera. The camera zooms in for a closer view before cutting to a shot of ocean, seagulls perched on partially submerged concrete architectural jetting out of the water.

Far from employing the "Ken Burns effect" to project the viewer into a photography by panning over the image and zooming in on its subjects, all of these films approach photos as elements of the landscape, as personal objects. In scanning the image of salvaged family photos, the viewer is led to wonder if the subjects depicted here were also swept away by the waves; if the owners will ever find them again, or if they have survived themselves. To varying degrees, the use of the filmed photograph supplies a placeholder for the many lives lost or scarred by the quake, an alternative to more explicit images of death and injury. The amateur footage that opens The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom functions very differently, interwoven as it is as an element of the film's diegesis. Even in the case of Walker's film, where the external footage edited into the larger work is more or less continuous, with cuts that appear natural and conceivably result from the actions of the original cameraperson, one can't help but wonder what precedes and follows that which one is given to see. Are the film-makers panning and scanning within the frame to censor gruesome imagery, or to draw attention to other aspects of the image than those intended by the original photographer? Either way, the material has been reframed. For a photo found on the ground or hanging out to dry, there is little consideration of what has been cut out. Rather, the focus is on what has been lost. These photo-objects serve as symbols for the themes of their respective films and informs their approach to the politics of the filmed photograph. "What is the source of this photo? "What has become of its subjects and owners?" in Omiya's case, such questions remain unanswered.

The instances in which these nested images recur are too numerous to list completely, but the effect is most overwhelming towards the end of The Sketch of Muyo. The film's coda begins with a hand-held close-up of photos strung to the wall of a school gymnasium: children playing outside, a couple in traditional wedding garb, a pre-teen offering the peace sign to the camera. This sequence, nearly four minutes long and completely silent, is composed of two panning shots over the wall of abandoned photographs: skiing trips, class photos, candid portraits of friends, family, and lovers, pictures of communal meals, outings in parks, festivals and baby pictures. Most of the photos are in good physical condition and have minimal water damage. Eventually the camera arrives at a sign asking people to claim any of their photos. If the viewer has failed to grasp the purpose of this solemn procession of images it should now become apparent. The camera passes over more photos and turns to follow a row of boxes holding salvaged goods towards the centre of the large space, revealing the expanse of the gym lined with other such containers, the walls covered with similar collages of photographs. A handful of people wander the space, looking through the collections of belongings before the scene cuts to black.

The episodic structure of The Sketch of Muyo, in which various encounters serve as portraits that form an overall picture of post-3.11 conditions, is comparable to the allusive function of filmed photographs. Omiya's documentary possesses a minimalist aesthetic, limiting the editing of interviews and dispensing with narration and composed music, save for the chants and bells of a Buddhist priest whose interview opens and structures the film. On the role of the documentary film-maker in the wake of disaster, Omiya comments: "I saw that the only way to be of any help was to listen to what these people had to say and to accept their words and emotions." He adds: "I know every documentarian has his own agenda and good documentaries are calculated to draw out certain words from the interviewees, which in turn are calculated to resonate with the viewers. But for this film, I wanted to forego all calculation. To just be there, with these people, in the here and now" (Shoji 2012). Locals openly contemplate their next steps in life and tough fishermen, many of whom have lost their homes, careers, and families, break down crying on screen; the film-maker stands by as witness. The issue of composing a story from the wreckage of broken lives is fraught with complexity. How should one approach the obvious vulnerability and pain of subjects in an interview? How does one choose to present the face of a stranger in a salvaged photograph whose fate is unknown? What can be said of the fixed stare of the camera on the young woman who loves the sea, as it zooms in to scrutinize the expression hidden beneath her face mask? Is there cruelty in the cut to soiled ocean waters? Is there undue irony in the shot of the train tracks which cut short the interview with an elderly woman, who could only gesture, at a loss for words, towards the possibility of others rebuilding in the future?

Omiya has a strong personal connection to Tohoku, having been born in the region, where his parents still live. Yet some critics of 3.11 documentaries have pointed to the stereotype of Tokyo urbanites driving northward and sticking cameras out the window and in the faces of the aging rural population. Although a drive of less than 300 kilometres, there is no small opportunity for culture clash, as many Tokyo dwellers can have difficulty understanding the Tohoku dialect (Tohoku-ben). Critics object that documentary film-makers should not function as "disaster tourists" whose presence only exacerbates the crisis and contributes
to an already chaotic environment. Toshi Fujiwara comments: "These people have lost their homes, their family members, an entire lifestyle. If you don't know what to shoot, then don't shoot. Go home. Leave them alone in peace." His film, *No Man's Zone* (2011, "Mujin chitai"), rethinks the intervention of the documentarian and the function of the interview. The "no man's zone" of Fujiwara's title, reminiscent of documentaries produced following the Chernobyl disaster, refers to the evacuation area within a 20-kilometre radius of the Fukushima Daiichi plant that was deemed a radioactive hazard by authorities. He memorializes this soon to be lost landscape while visiting those who will not or cannot leave. But rather than show these people to the audience, more often his camera visually interrogates the landscape itself in a manner that recalls the experimental film-makers from the period following Japan's student movements of the late 1960s, who offered pointed social critiques through abstract, yet highly materialist means (Japan's "landscape theory," or fukei-ron, and the political art projects in film and photography associated with it).

 Appropriately, this film contains a relative paucity of images of filmed photographs. Aside from incidental, undamaged photographs displayed in the homes that Fujiwara visits, the only notable instance of a photograph receiving special attention from the camera occurs when a sheet of paper, printed with the image of a landscape, is used to point out the effects of the tsunami. A close-up frames the scanned picture on a table beside glasses of beer as a former nuclear power plant worker, using a brightly decorated pencil to point out where the water stopped and where people were killed, recounts driving away from the tsunami with his grandson. The truth is not reached here by delivering a raw account to the camera, nor through poetic organization of images and sound. The text speaks of itself in a detached commentary and openly considers its own intentions and hesitations, expressing a distrust of the images it reveals. In fact, the filmic image itself is treated as an object of criticism.

 The voice of the film's disembodied narrator, the Armenian-Canadian actress Arsinée Khanjian, pronounces scripted text in an English monotone not unlike the commentary of the essay films of Chris Marker, notably *Sans Soleil* (1983), where Japan and the relation of photography to memory also feature prominently. *No Man's Zone* opens with a black screen:

Images of destruction are always difficult to digest. While facing them we become desperate to find a clue or understand. To decode. [Titles begin to appear] To measure the size of the damages. Maybe as an excuse to cover our secret fascination with them. They become stimulants, often consumed as drugs. Today, perhaps, we have become simply addicted to all images of destruction.

Khanjian's narration gives way to the image of a battered coastline and the sound of crashing waves. A slow pan away from the shoreline reveals a landscape that now resembles a landfill littered with surviving portions of houses, boats and cars. The score's single theme begins shortly thereafter, Barre Phillips' bass accompanied by a mournful female vocal. For the next twenty minutes, and intermittently throughout the rest of the film, the testimony of interviewees is presented only as voiceover, their image absent, while the battered landscapes unfold on screen. This formal innovation serves to shield the film's subjects from its viewers — or, to protect its subjects from the film itself. The imposed bond between their voices and shots of the ravaged landscape would seem to lend new agency to their words by contrast with a more diverse and illustrative form of montage.

Many of the interview subjects are elderly retirees who have spent full careers in the nuclear industry. They recall the area's transition from agricultural to industrial production as they emotionally process the plant's devastating effect on the land and their recent or impending ejection from their homes. While images of muddy debris appear in a steady stream of landscape views (stationary compositions, although trucking shots appear elsewhere in the film), an unseen elderly woman recollects the details of farm life: "During the agriculture off-seasons, I also worked in construction. Both men and woman worked in these constructions. Roads and also wave breakers on the beach. I got in the river to collect small stones and sand to make concrete. Back then, there were no machines, just manual labor. To live only on farming was hard." A shot of upended heavy machinery, treads in the air, accompanies her final comments. On the whole, however, the placement of images feels disconnected from the interviewees' statements. They seem to function as divergent media streams converging on a common endpoint.

The cumulative effect of the human voice on the stricken landscape in *No Man's Zone* is taken up by the director in an interview with Chris Fujiwara: "It's about the slow decomposition of a local community which has been taking place over the years, all the values that used to be important, the sense of community, the respect for history and communal as well as family heritage, all disappearing." The formal condensation of this idea contributes to a radical reflection on power as visualized in the landscape. Toshi Fujiwara grounds his sharp critique of the state-corporate complex in a natural setting. He thereby raises the stakes for asserting a personal apprehension of images and their creation. The idea of power as reflected in and articulated through landscape has long been a subject of study in visual culture, yet this depends upon the non-fixedness of the perception of the environment. In his preface to the second edition of *Landscape and Power*, W. J. T. Mitchell writes:

If one wanted to continue to insist on power as the key to the significance of landscape, one would have to acknowledge that it is a relatively weak power compared to that of armies, police forces, governments, and corporations. Landscape exerts a subtle power over people, eliciting a broad range of emotions and meanings that may be difficult to specify. This indeterminacy of effect seems, in fact, to be a crucial feature of whatever force landscape can have. As the background within which a figure, form, or narrative act emerges, landscape exerts the passive force of setting, scene, and sight. It is generally the "looked over," not the "looked at," and it can be quite difficult to specify what exactly it means to say that one is "looking at the landscape.”

(Mitchell 2002: xii)
Fujiiwa's camera interrogates the landscape as if searching for an invisible hegemonic force, here synonymous with the spectre of radiation pervading the exclusion zone. While this digital video image betrays no trace of radiation damage, one is reminded of Vladimir Shevchenko's Chernobyl: A Chronicle of Difficult Weeks (1986), in which the developed film appeared speckled, and his audiotape garbled during moments flying over the clean-up area. One almost expects to see the flash of gamma rays that were recorded by the remote-controlled endoscope video camera TEPCO utilized to peer into its failed Fukushima reactors and gauge damage. Natural space bears an imminent threat.

As we imagine the lives that have been lived on this soil, as well as the turmoil of the quake and tsunami itself, unseen but for the aftermath, the landscape is rendered allegorical, and highly anthropological. Fujiiwa's narrator even relays the cameraman's initial reluctance to perform a handheld shot while walking over the debris. He thinks it is disrespectful, and is afraid that he might step on a dead body, a gruesome reality that is barely mentioned in other 3.11 documentary projects.

As an alternative to Fujiiwa's aesthetic, Yoju Matsubayashi's Fukushima: Memories of the Lost Landscape (2011), ("Soma kanka Daichibou Ubawareta tochino kikoku") offers an intimate variation on the film-maker-subject dynamic, heeding the call for a more personal perspective. The film offers explanatory intertitles throughout that provide context from the film-maker's perspective; it opens in Matsubayashi's Tokyo apartment, the camera shaking from the tremors as the film-maker rushes about his small living space watching the TV news as it airs updates from Tohoku. Three weeks after the quake, he travels to Minamisoma, where, like Fujiiwa, he films within the 20-kilometre "red zone" prior to the April 20th mandatory evacuation deadline. He joins the volunteers and stays in emergency evacuee quarters in a local school. With the approval of city councilperson Kyoko Tanaka, he trails her as she patrols the neighbourhood, cares for evacuees, and tends to her own family as it manages the crisis. The film takes on the form of a video diary, documenting not only the accounts of local people, and day-to-day volunteer work, but also an increasing trust between the film-maker and Mrs Tanaka and her husband Kyoji.

Like the Sketch of Myojo, Memories of the Lost Landscape includes scenes of the salvaging of family photo albums, which are developed as important themes of reflection and remembrance throughout. In their first outing together, Tanaka spots a stray photo album and dutifully retrieves it. She sets it aside for safekeeping after recognizing the family it belongs to from the pictures it contains. Matsubayashi pitches in to help with her duties, though, realistically and refreshingly, he mostly follows orders. His questions are not those of a prying interviewer, but of someone just keeping up to speed with the tasks at hand. Matsubayashi is in his early thirties, while Tanaka is approaching old age, but he hustles to keep up with the spritely community organizer, camera at the ready. By the end of the film, Matsubayashi, describing his relationship to the Tanakas, speaks of them as family. The contract between interviewer and interviewee has become an intimate connection, and authorship of the finished work blurred.

Similarly, in Yuki Kubo's Kasamayaki, the roles of documentary film-maker and earthquake survivor continue to merge. The creators and preservers of images forge a strong bond. In Kasamayaki, the cracks brought into relief by the quake run specifically along family lines. The film's title, which can also be translated as "made in Kasama," refers to the style of pottery originating from Kasama, Ibaraki, where the film-maker's parents live in a community of artists. The film documents an attempt to reconcile between the daughter and her parents. I had met Kubo, in New York, prior to her second trip back to the area to visit her parents, to help them prepare for their community's annual craft festival, and of course, to film. My research on documentary media created in the aftermath of the 3.11 quake largely evolved as I watched her film come together.

The film, still in post-production, resembles a meditation on the healing power of creativity. Kubo's film seeks to heal wounds hidden by time that have been brought to the surface by the shock of the earthquake and the thought of impending danger from Fukushima. As a young child, Kubo came to New York with her parents, who hoped to find success in the city's vibrant art scene. When they decided to return to Japan to make a living through pottery, she was left in the city as a teenager. In this highly personal form of documentary, the distancing effect of the filmed interview situation functions as a means of removing oneself from the bounds of interpersonal tangles. The same apparatus that lends a place of privilege to the cameraperson in interpersonal situations can also open up, in this case, a new space between close family members, a space for confrontation, open conversation. Kubo frames her mother or father – facing the camera or working at a sculpting table or pottery wheel – with the film-maker speaking from behind the lens or beside the camera, often conspicuously caught in a mirror. Kubo's parents' pottery practice and their past New York art projects are intertwined to the process of creating the film. Each involves a therapeutic act of creation, though using vastly different tools. Kubo and her father visit a once familiar area that has been wiped away by the tsunami. They borrow a geiger counter to measure radiation around the couple's home, but receive discouraging results. The quake, the film's inciting incident, looms large over the drama portrayed, yet the earthquake, tsunami, and even the nuclear disaster are perceived as entirely inevitable occurrences by the family. The former are natural phenomena intrinsically linked to cultural history and the latter an unfortunate symptom of its modern identity.

This project, perhaps more than any of the others discussed previously, answers a call for renewal and reconstruction. For Kubo, this is accomplished through cinema. The medium is here conceived as a constructive device that is capable of spurring change; its exercise, however, involves a fair share of destruction as well. The camera acts as a wedge, driving new realizations of self, family, and community out of its subjects.

Kasamayaki offers a useful insight into the role of documentary following times of crisis. By placing a strong emphasis on craft and the nature of creative labour, the film insinuates upon the persistent impulse for preserving and producing images as seen in other 3.11 documentaries. It asserts that art in general, and photography and film in particular, can present ways of processing a natural disaster such as the Tohoku earthquake. Here, a creative disposition is
seen as something of a burden, one which requires a distance from others to allow one’s process to develop. Yet it also provides an opportunity for renewal. As Kukubo’s mother comments: “People who make things pull themselves up by creating. You can renew yourself by creating.”

Matsubayashi presents a potential collaborative solution in Memories of a Lost Landscape. Following the mandatory evacuation of their Minamisoma home, the Tanaka couple were given the opportunity by the government to temporarily return in order to retrieve some of their belongings. Before boarding a police-escorted bus with other residents, Kyoko and Kyuji are given special radiation protection suits, footwear, hairnets, and medical face masks. As the couple excitedly prepare to leave, Matsubayashi films a security personnel member pointing a video camera at him, the two lenses facing each other in mutual surveillance. Matsubayashi, filming alongside a crew of news cameras, watches the couple get on the bus and drive away. Before leaving, Matsubayashi had given Kyuji quick instructions for operating a simple digital still camera with a video recording function capable of capturing up to 30 minutes of footage.

Matsubayashi then edits the images shot by Kyuji into his film. The “home movie” footage begins with a remarkably steady shot from the back of the van as it enters the evacuation area. The camera, positioned above the hairnets that cover the heads of the other passengers, points out the window at the passing scenery. The townsfolk comment on the sorry state of nearby houses as the van passes by. The unseen camera operator, now inside the Tanaka home, slides open a closet door. The next shot, a view out of the window, reveals mounds of collected debris. The camera then moves back outside where, plastic trash bags of belongings in their hands, the suited neighbours are gathering for the return bus. As they get back in, they assist one another by adjusting the layers of their thin protective plastic suits in order to reduce the risk of contamination. Back on board, they chat happily together.

The film then reverts to Matsubayashi’s footage, as Mr and Mrs Tanaka, upon returning, are swarmed by reporters. They remove their protective suits and prepare to leave with their belongings. Matsubayashi pushes through this circle of cameras and microphones and films Kyuji as he is asked by reporters to hold up what he chose to take out of the exclusion area. He proudly removes his grandson’s prized card collection and jokes good heartedly: “They want to see my grandson’s treasure. Do you give me something if I show you this?”

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References


Notes

1 See SAFECAST Japan <http://blog.safecast.org/about>.
2 As Walker’s film is made for Japanese and English-speaking audiences, the title is presented in both languages. Unless otherwise noted, in the description of the films that follows Japanese dialogue is relayed through its subtitled English translation.
3 David Karashima and Elmer Luke’s collection of short fiction and nonfiction literature created in reaction to the quake.
7 Chris Fujiwara, “A Conversation with Toshi Fujiwara about No Man’s Zone.”

Cinema in Reconstruction

Kasamayuki (Dir. Yuki Kubo), 2014
No Man’s Zone (Dir. Toshi Fujiwara, 2011, “Mujin chitai”).
The Sketch of Mujo (Dir. Koichi Omiya, 2011, “Mujo Sobyo”).
The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom (Dir. Lucy Walker, 2011).