Standing, looking out the window for a moment while a waiter processed my payment in a Greek restaurant/café; I had a strange thought today. The New York neighborhood I've been living in for the past year has many such establishments, a small interior layout with abundant nautical Mediterranean accents that might indicate bad taste—if the seafood weren't so good. The restaurant opens up to the sidewalk, where numerous tables are arranged to take full advantage of all available space, and make room for the steady flow of customers during its busy hours. This wasn't a busy time of day, a few couples drinking wine and sharing small plates, enjoying the sun after so many days of rain. Past lunchtime, but too early for an early dinner, the time of day the manager would ask someone to come in for a job interview.

I was getting takeout. From my line of sight at the bar, the balance of the building on its foundation seemed crooked, the sidewalk appeared to rise at an incline out of balance with the avenue in front of me. I thought I'd noticed this before, I may even have remembered; many buildings in the area afforded similar views. I saw a truck making a delivery across the street, banners hanging from retail shops, colorful vinyl store signs streaked with rot and mildew, all curbside parking filled by cars. Perhaps it was because I'd just handed the waiter a debit card decorated with the beautiful curvature of the Earth as seen from space rendered in a white void (a complimentary personalization I'd opted for that supported some environmental charity or another, "Brighter Planet" it turns out), perhaps it was because I hadn't eaten fish in some time—but I was visited once again by the realization that I live in a time of animals riding off the rails of a nature they grew out of. Harkening a tipping point in the movement against the self-destructive trajectory of the lost bipeds who stoked the flame of their own species with the holy fire of life until they burned as one unwieldy torch is Tomoko Kana’s anti-alarmist “Beautiful Islands”(2009), a subtle and by all accounts beautiful documentation of the experiences of some of the first cultures to be affected by climate change. These changes are not regarded as science fiction realized, but as quotidian fact, a lived reality. I'm curious to see another work addressing such a topical and debated issue in as staid a manner as the one Kana adopts here. I anticipate more works to be developed in this tone as an emotional identification with natural disasters precipitated by human negligence is assumed in audiences and the environmental documentary as a subset of social documentary becomes a more sophisticated form; and here’s hoping for a greater familiarity with information surrounding these controversies amongst audience members.

The film had its New York premiere along with a Q&A with director Tomoko Kana at Lincoln Center’s Walter Reade Theater August 24th, courtesy of NEW YORK – TOKYO. Aside from its timely subject and thoughtful craftsmanship, Beautiful Islands has received considerable international
attention due to Hirokazu Kore-eda’s involvement in the project as executive producer. More than the simple catalyzing effect of a senior director’s star power, Kana and Kore-eda’s careers reveal a number of parallels which might pique the interest of the more established artist’s fans. Kana began her career as a news producer at the Japanese television station, NHK, before becoming independent in 2000. Similarly, before pursuing a career in narrative filmmaking, Kore-eda broke into production by working for TV MAN UNION, an independent television production company (I

The film does not disappoint the inevitable expectations put upon it by such lofty connections. Like the majority of Kore-eda’s films—save for Still Walking (2008) and Air Doll (2009), the director’s most recent features—Beautiful Islands presents itself as entirely content remaining as what it is. Guiding you through its three paradises in peril (the Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu; Venice, Italy; and Shishmaref, Alaska), this observational piece averts the rhetorical conventions of environmentally minded social documentary, its most engaging moments had during interviews with casually engaged subjects. The awkwardness of the camera as a social element is seen in microcosm here, supporting the film’s projection of a highly considered view of the medium, beyond audio-visual mouthpiece. There is a familiar formula to the film consisting of observational sequences and constructed interview situations placed in characters’ natural surroundings, yet an easy presentation and unforced progression remove it from a generic tradition of fact plus human testimony equals emotional reaction equals acceptance of agenda. I’d align this level of pretense closer to Jessica Oreck’s recent “Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo” (2009), an explorative essay film on cultural relations with insects.

Beautiful Islands begins with what is arguably its strongest section, on the people of Tuvalu. Here it develops the style it sustains throughout the rest of the film, carried through its following two sections and a short return to the tropical archipelago, ending where it began. Revealing more in terms of editorial strategy than rhetorical manipulation, the film’s three parts are organized according to simple themes, indicated by superimposed title/subtitle pairs: “Sisters: Children’s Time,” “Slow Living: Sustainability,” “Departure: What is Being Lost,” and so on. Informational text plays little part in the film’s enchantment of the viewer, but those facts that do grace the screen are quite convincing, such as an estimation by the UN that the archipelago that forms Tuvalu will sink within the next century. In fact, although the filmic transmission of the characters’ emotions as we see them does not feel incomplete, the subtitling of on screen dialogue imparts a casual sense of communication. While the recounting of personal histories and more complex stories is treated to (apparently) faithful transcription, moments of children playing and casual chit chat may go un-translated, the occasion English excerpt gently confirming what you already knew you weren’t missing.

An intimate view of a people’s lifestyle is vital here, not only in order to understand how it is being disrupted, but also because these are traditions that will have to change with the world’s shifting ecosystem. Much time is spent with the people of Tuvalu, Venice and Shishmaref before we see the clear signs of the dangers facing their lives as they’ve known them: high tides flooding huts and luxury hotels, water breaking in not from the shore around you but the soil below, gondoliers see water rise up against building walls in their urban channels like never before, children leave home to start a lives elsewhere, their parents’ livelihoods no longer sustainable. There’s an element of ethnography in the film, and the Alaskan setting toward the end makes comparisons to Robert F. Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) unavoidable. Interestingly, as the film travels from a tropical island where planes land only twice a week to an Italian tourist-saturated European city on the water to a village in Alaska which shares a Native American and American lineage, the sense of ethnography somehow fades. It’s hard to say how this shapes the urgency of the presentation film’s subject, or message, although that terminology does not apply here as it does elsewhere in the genre. For audiences in developed areas, the first location should seem the most exotic, the second the most familiar, and the third a sort of synthesis of the two. There’s the suggestion of a global village here, and some of the opening scenes set in a Tuvaluan elementary school classroom—where the instructor leads a discussion on climate change and how it affects their community—rightfully places responsibility on those who consume and expend an unfair share of the Earth’s resources. An element which goes without undue highlight in the film is that of globalization, and the already problematic notion of paradise.
Some critics have understandably taken issue with the film's lack of rhetorical specificity, or its supposed failure to allow the places to speak for themselves; arguments which seem at odds with each other. The film certainly takes the middle approach, and admittedly arrives neither here nor there in terms of a treatise on global warming or shifting cultural traditions. But I do believe it presents a steady view of our current situation, with all the appropriate gravity and humor such grave circumstances necessitate.

P.S. As a component of the promotional effort behind Beautiful Islands, an iPhone photo app has been developed which allows users to take photographs and add a digital effect simulating the reflective surface of water at variable horizontal orientations. The user interface includes prompts in English and Japanese such as "Take a photo of your favorite view!" and "Your favorite view may look like this in the future..."
The late Satoshi Kon’s 2003 “Tokyo Godfathers” tells the story of a misfit trio of Tokyoites searching for family during the Christmas holiday. An oft overlooked modern day ensemble piece, to my mind the film fits more comfortably in the history of Japan’s live-action cinema than its much celebrated animations. Interestingly, it was “Tokyo Godfathers” that provided Kon a breakthrough in the American market, then notable as an alternative to the action/fantasy oriented offerings which still dominate the anime import market, while earning a win at Japan’s Mainichi Film Consours.

Ostensibly a Christmas morality tale in which a group of downtrodden characters—Gin, an alcoholic ex-gambler (voiced by Toru Emori); Miss Hana, a former drag queen (Yoshiaki Umegaki); and Miyuki, a teenage runaway (Aya Okamoto)—endeavor to return an abandoned infant to its rightful parents, and thereby initiate a search for familial belonging in their personal histories and the ragtag family unit they have naturally formed together. Domestic alleyway bickering between the surrogate father, mother and daughter plays as an absurdist shomingeki (a genre of realist contemporary dramas focusing on the lives of working class people synonymous with the films of Yasujirō Ozu and Mikio Naruse) highlight by classic anime comedy techniques of hyperbolic expression, while Tokyo is rendered as a stratified metropolis allotting space for those at the bottom in cold public space or temporary gaps left by commercial development.

As Mari Yamaguchi notes in the Chicago Sun-Times (Mari Yamaguchi in the Chicago Sun-Times), the film can be understood as a loose adaptation of John Ford’s 1948 “3 Godfathers” (“3 Godfathers”),
itself an adaptation of Peter Kyne's novella of the same title, originally adapted as a silent film by Ford in 1919 as "Marked Men." Of course all these incarnations bear the strong imprint of the Story of the Three Wisemen, including "Tokyo Godfathers." This Western textual basis, as well as the dominating presence of Christmas-related iconography (the digits for Christmas day appear throughout the film in various cutaways, one of Kon's playful self-referential ticks--look for posters of some of the director's past films in the film's representation of Tokyo) supports the landscape's apprehensively multicultural vibe.

Our three wisemen are total outsiders in this society, although they have descended to this low state of cultural standing due to varying degrees of self-imposition, as we learn in nostalgic flashback scenes that allow for Kon's cinematic exercises in blending memory, fantasy and reality while nodding to filmic genre--allowed far greater playspace in his other works, particularly "Paprika" (2006). Hints toward the broader societal concerns of the film lie in the opening credits, in which titles appear as if painted or plastered onto Tokyo's architecture, as well as the closing title sequence in which titles scroll over skyscrapers literally dancing in the night sky. See one of the original Japanese posters (communicating the film's themes far more clearly than the jokey American poster) for a taste of this dancing skyline, in which the three main characters figure as bewildered Kaiju, Godzilla or King Kong.

The social critiques inherent in the suitmation films of Japan may not have been a key reference point for the film's staff, but their relevance is not lost on this viewer.

The perspective of the background characters that constitute the human foundation of these dancing buildings of Tokyo is summed up with blunt eloquence by a doctor the three encounter in their journey: "I can try to cure disease. Lifestyle is something you have to fix. All anyone can do is their best. Take care." The man rises to a standing position, revealing a steel brace on his leg. Everyone has their reasons. Most radically, the film presents characters who validate artificial family in the process of creating, or renewing familial bonds, locating pleasing simulacrums of such a venture in unexpected places.

Tags: Satoshi Kon, Tokyo Godfathers

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Related Articles
Miike’s “13 Assassins”

When Eiichi Kudo’s 1963 “Thirteen Assassins” was first released in Japan, it was widely criticized as a low grade reworking of Akira Kurosawa’s “Seven Samurai,” released nine years before. An early entry in a new brand of period films termed zankoku jidaigeki—or “cruel historicals”—coming at the start of Toei’s transition from its previous focus on jidaigeki (“period films”) to yakuza eiga (contemporary or recent history pictures depicting the world of Japan’s indigenous gang culture), Kudo’s film differed from Kurosawa’s in that its story was relatively limited to the political sphere of the samurai class (military nobility). Kurosawa’s seven samurai were poor ronin, masterless samurai defending peasant farmers during the Warring States Period in which the country was plagued by nearly continuous war from the fifteenth to seventeenth century, prior to unification under the Tokugawa shogunate. Kudo’s characters however operated in the early nineteenth century, a time of relative peace in which the bakuhan—the nation’s feudal political system of which the samurai were an important component—
had came into question. Although the film is often cited as incorporating many contemporaneous
themes such as assassination plots and anti-establishment sentiments close to the 1960s student
movements, it is also generally considered to be overshadowed by Kudo’s “The Great Killing” of the
following year, which depicts lower class samurai closer to Kurosawa’s protagonists and goes as far
to layering audio from student demonstrations into a battle scene.

Takashi Miike though, is no stranger to decadence on film—and these warrior bureaucrats of the
waning samurai era suit his varied themes of excess, revenge, self-mutilation and (somewhat) self-
critical misogyny just fine as he goes about remaking Kudo’s earlier film, here widely marketed as “13
Assassins” (2010). With an oeuvre constituting nothing less than a cinephile’s dream, Miike’s
prodigious output, genre-mashing appetite for subversion and bold adoption of stale franchises and
remakes (as well as timely contributions to a brand of recent East Asian films labeled “extreme
cinema”) have afforded him a loyal international following. “13 Assassins” (2010) recently screened
as part of “Shinjuku Outlaw: 13 from Takashi Miike”, a retrospective at the Film Society of Lincoln
Center co-organized by Marc Walkow and co-presented with Subway Cinema. “13 Assassins”
opens in U.S. theaters today, April 29, and is currently available through video-on-demand streaming
(something of a pre-theatrical release experiment; a harbinger of things to come in terms of
distribution). Takashi Miike would have attended the recent retrospective if it were not for the
earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis that struck the northeast of Japan on March 11, 2011 and
panicked the nation and onlookers around the world. At the time of writing, the number of people
dead or missing is nearly 28,000. I think it’s worth presenting the message Miike provided his New
York audience in his absence before the essay delves into his film:

Japan was violently rocked, swallowed by the ocean as the lives of many disappeared amid the rubble.
I had wanted to be here with you all. I had wanted to thank you all for coming from the bottom of my
heart. But that wish was not granted. It is unfortunate and I am very sorry. Please accept my regrets.
But, from this adversity—on our lives—we will all rise up without fail. As a start, I would be grateful if
you could enjoy Japan from my films.

Sincerely,

Miike Takashi

In fact, the natural disaster in Japan also delayed the completion of this article, as most of my energy
has been devoted to fundraising activities at Japan Society for the past six weeks. This event has—for
me—displayed the strong connection between New York City and Japan, the power of physically
remote tragedies to eclipse your world and alienate you from your immediate surroundings and local
culture, as well as the success of social media over traditional channels in delivering news—especially
when it comes to verifying the safety of family and friends.

Aside from historical discrepancies outlined above, Miike’s “13 Assassins” holds much in common
with Kurosawa’s “Seven Samurai,” not least of all a great debt to the American Western genre. Koji
Yakusho’s gentleman samurai is first seen idly fishing before he is called out on the covert
assassination mission that propels the story forward; the old gunfighter called out of retirement.
Turning his head as he stares at a woman his target had brutally maimed, the old samurai expresses
delight at the opportunity to realize his destiny of dying in combat. Yakusho assembles his “Dirty
Dozen plus one” in the fashion of Takashi Shimura in “Seven Samurai” or Anthony Wong in Johnnie
To’s “The Mission” (1999). It’s a rag-tag group, including a Daisuke Kato look-alike, a giant ronin
(Tsuyoshi Ihara), a teenage orphan (afforementioned ronin’s swordfighting pupil) and a few tarento
pretty boys. The bullish Hiroshi Matsukata rounds out an already impressive cast and pairs well with
Yakusho’s philosopher swordsman—except this gunfighter isn’t exactly a warrior. When his mission to
execute a sadistic young nobleman above the law due to questionable familial relations to the
shogun (Japan’s de facto military dictator within the bakufu) brings him in contact with a former sparring
partner now serving as the sadist’s chief guard, their rivalry is that of old school buddies thrust from
idealistic youth through a middle age of dry office work and into the glorious battle they’d always
dreamed of, hurdling themselves onward to inevitable death. They soon realize their thirst for
righteous combat as a reflection of the young sadist’s malformed desire to “bring back the time of
war”, and while the stakes escalate from executing a perverted upstart with a chance at rising to the
throne to thwarting a tyrant’s willful destruction of a nation that glory in death men worship on the
training ground and fear on the battlefield is questioned.

The male sex/death drive is alternately encouraged and stunted by the onscreen presentation,
actually creating a rather lonely yet fantastical depiction of the feudal warrior. In opposition to what
one would expect from a testosterone-fueled action/adventure film, female characters are as unattractive as the battle sequences are outlandishly spectacular. Faces caked with shiny make-up and eyebrows shaven, the cosmetic ornaments of the day are not shown in a positive light. Masculine bravura and gory carnage are the primary eye candies here. The only female character presented as desirable is the forest nomad lover of the apparently invincible hunter/trapper character who joins the crew as the thirteenth assassin, modeled on Toshiro Miike’s role in “Seven Samurai.”

The extended final battle sequence is of course a clear counterpoint to Kurosawa’s, set in a dry, dusty village rather than a rainy, muddy one (a key element missing from Miike’s film is the participation of the townsfolk, which would call for a more in-depth sociological inquiry). Though when Miike’s gates close on the invading army (again vastly outnumbering our band of samurai, here thirteen versus roughly two hundred), trapping them within the walls of the town-turned-fortress, the differences between the two films become far more pronounced. For one there is the focus on a specific antagonist, embodied by the royal sadist. Kurosawa’s violent bandit horde did not have such a figurehead. Kurosawa’s samurai also did not employ the use of CGI-aided flaming boars and anachronistic booby traps, though these are certainly welcome in Miike’s jidaigeki universe. The existence of Kudo’s original of course complicates the comparison, but an easy justification for the graduation from seven to thirteen samurai is of course the capability of dispensing of far more human life; more bloodshed. As endorphins eventually wear down and protagonists begin dwindling in numbers, the style of the film breaks down in a calculated manner, at points resembling documentary footage of sparring actors on a jidaigeki backlot with way too many extras and a maniacal make-up artist.

Primary criticism lies in those elements which at the same time pleasingly satisfy genre tropes: a weak critical perspective on gender inequality of a kind particular to films about men and violence, and a sometimes monotonous succession of set pieces all directed at creating the ultimate post-modern samurai battle sequence—luckily these scenes go quite far in that direction.

Aside from the astonishing telephoto shot of an exhausted Yakusho finally confronting the proud sadist—sole survivor of his sottered army—the images which stay with me most strongly are those from Tsuyoshi Ihara’s character’s death. The sight of the powerful ronin being struck down by a neverending parade of far weaker swordsmen is captured by the sideways letterbox POV of his young pupil—his nodding pants and loss of focus motivated as he himself gasps his last breaths. An encapsulation of Miike at his best, this depiction of the fallen hero’s generically inevitable demise exceeds genre expectations.

Tags: 13 Assassins, Takashi Miike

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One Response to Miike’s “13 Assassins”

Claude Armstrong says:
I believe, and this may be an erroneous belief, that you meant to write “hurtling” and not “hurdling”. Your review has a hurtling style I like very much, swirling, breathless. I felt like the dying samurai reading the last sentence of the “hurdling” paragraph – assaulted from all sides by figures violently wanting to be separate and complete.

Claude Armstrong
Japan, One Year After the Quake, Pt. 1

Published on March 5th, 2012 | by Joel Neville Anderson

Reconstruction in Documentary and the Role of Documentary in Reconstruction

Given the wealth of audio-visual documentation available, it would be inappropriate to begin writing about films covering the largest earthquake to strike Japan in recorded history and the tragedies that resulted therefrom in strictly cinematic terms.

As recent quakes in Haiti, Laos, Turkey, New Zealand, and China have demonstrated, the hidden fault lines and topographical details that determine the effects of such a cataclysm are as much cultural as they are physical. Even if you didn't feel the massive 9.0 magnitude tremors yourself, chances are you did indirectly experience the quake and tsunami via someone who was there on the ground: a cell-phone picture or video uploaded to a blog or broadcast on national news, tweets out of the affected region, and retweets from around the world. Perhaps you tuned into the online video stream of the intrepid polyglot who stayed up for hours live-translating Japanese TV news reports. This user-
oriented, multi-platform media saturation was how so many experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011. The instant accessibility of the images of destruction came as a component of Japan’s First-World status, as did the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant crisis, painting a rather convincing portrait of a twenty-first century apocalypse at the same time that it tested the power of internet-based ingenuity. Just as social media supplemented traditional news outlets unprepared to inform, the failure of government bureaucracies to adequately protect citizens from the threat of nuclear radiation led to the crowdsourcing of radiation measurements. The critical need for emergency support and coordination, as well as long-term reconstruction aid, spurred serious change in Japan’s long-held cultural aversion toward philanthropy and non-profit organizations. It has been popularly claimed that these series of disasters revived a collectivist ethos in the country dampened by years of economic stagnation, as well as highlighted the particular resilience of the old-fashioned, hardworking Tohoku region, whose dignity in the face of tragedy is expressed in the phrase, *shikata ga nai* (“It can’t be helped”).

There will be films, though. In fact, exploitation film director Sion Sono was about to begin production on his adaptation of the manga “Himizu” just prior to the quake. He famously decided to write the disaster into the story and set it in the afflicted region of northeastern Japan. In time, the quake would make its way into short dramatic works such as Yukihiro Shoda’s online piece “blind” (2011), which imagines a contamination requiring denizens of Tokyo to wear gas masks outdoors. It also provided an instigating conflict for New York-based Yosuke Hosoi’s coming of age story, “Man of the House” (2011), which screened locally on March 3 at the Queens World Film Festival. We’re just now beginning to see the quake as a quotidian element of contemporary Japanese features, notably Yoji Yamada’s long-awaited (or dreaded, for Ozu canonists) remake of/homage to Yasujiro Ozu’s “Tokyo Story” (1953), as well as Nobuteru Uchida’s forthcoming “Odayaka na Nichijou” (“Calm Daily Life,” 2012), about two families in outer Tokyo affected by the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, starring Kiki Sugino and Susumu Terajima.

Right after the quake, however, as the waves subsided, and fears of nuclear contamination were just being pieced together, an influx of documentary filmmakers had already set out looking for stories in the ruins. I’d like to discuss two of the films produced from these investigations of a broken landscape and its beaten but resolute survivors.

*The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom* (Lucy Walker, 2011), now especially well known in the United States thanks to its Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Short, follows a form described by its director as a visual haiku. The piece is essentially set in two parts with an emerging synthesis. As the title suggests, it initially focuses on the earthquake and tsunami, and almost exactly halfway shifts toward examining the nature of *sakura*, the cherry blossom. The aesthetic quality of this flower is generally defined as *mono no aware*, an awareness of things and their passing, transient nature. The film opens with extended raw footage shot from a hill overseeing the approach of the tsunami as it engulfs an entire town and washes away an elderly care facility. This uncut sequence communicates the feeling of powerlessness in the midst of a natural disaster more effectively than anything the production team could have cut together. Not to say that the work to follow is unconvincing. Interviewees, mostly over the age of sixty, stand outside their collapsed domiciles and devastated neighborhoods recounting the first minutes of the tsunami’s approach, edited together with handheld footage shot by locals. Moby’s soundtrack is soothing and unobtrusive given the pleasing editing.
style, which quite naturally evolves into an essayistic pursuit across its objective theme. Given the spring season, the film's turn towards cherry blossoms seems natural, and those connections drawn by the filmmaker feel real and true.

"The Sketch of Mujo" (Koichi Omiya, 2011) builds around itself an entirely different form. Like many documentaries of the earthquake, it's something of a road movie. Whereas Walker's "Blossom" hovers around a few handfuls of interviewees, Omiya's "Sketch" moves from place to place, carrying out minimally edited interviews and brief tours of the remains of a household, desecrated fishing bays (many of the interviewees are lifelong fishermen, their homes and livelihoods destroyed simultaneously) and makeshift shelters and clinics. Omiya, who appears onscreen, is in fact accustomed to working with the aging population typical of rural Japan, as his previous film, "Tadaima" (2010) focused on the nursing care system, and a follow-up is reportedly in the works.

There is no composed soundtrack but for the chants of a Buddhist priest whose extended interview in a temple is actually returned to periodically throughout the film and provides welcome but not particularly necessary pacing and structure. The Buddhist connection is in fact significant, for while mono no aware has its roots deeper in Japanese aesthetics and Shinto animism, mujo is a Buddhist term with the Sanskrit equivalent anicca, meaning "impermanence."

In both Walker's and Omiya's films, the shikata ga nai quality—so potent in both the children and the elderly characters presented—is driven toward an awareness of these interrelated sensibilities. In "Blossom," a calm, well-composed man in a shelter wearing clean but likely donated clothing speaks of his good friend who was swept away by the tsunami while returning to save his brand new car: "I want to call him stupid because he threw his life away. We've lost our friends, and we've lost our brothers and sisters. We lost too many lives. And so we learned the preciousness of human life. And through this disaster, we've become connected and close. I'm not going to be defeated by this. Revive. I'm going to keep breathing." Halfway through, he breaks down, but his own words bring back his strength. "Mujo"s Buddhist priest expresses a similar desire to make the best of this new awareness, this preciousness. His proposed solution may sound familiar: "If a building is put up on our street, we forget what was there before in no time at all. I see the devastation on the afflicted land. I am determined not to forget it. Build a city that may withstand tsunami, and we will forget this. I think we have to stay in fear. We must keep this fear. We must keep the memory alive." Clear connections to Japan's past as the only country to feel the scar of wartime nuclear attack immediately come to mind, and it's a connection made visually in "Blossom" where in one later sequence we rack focus from a cherry blossom to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial dome in the background, the skeleton of a building which had survived the United States' nuclear bomb attack and was subsequently preserved.

The most precious memories salvaged from the rubble and mud in Tohoku will be the subject of the second installment of this article, to be published here at Cinespect on March 11, the earthquake's anniversary.

**Tags:** Best Documentary Short, Buddhism, Calm Daily Life, featured, Fukushima Daiichi, full-image, haiku, Himizu, Hiroshima, Hiroshima Peace Memorial, Kiki Sugino, Koichi Omiya, Lucy Walker, Man of the House, Moby, Nobuteru Uchida, Odayaka na Nichijo, Queens World Film Festival, Sanskrit, Shinto, Sion Sono, Susumu Terajima, Tadaima, The Academy Awards, The Sketch of Mujo, The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom, Tohoku, Tokyo, Tokyo Story, Yasujiro Ozu, Yoji Yamada, Yosuke Hosoi, Yukihiro
This article follows “Japan, One Year After the Quake, Pt. 1: Reconstruction in Documentary and the Role of Documentary in Reconstruction,” published at Cinespect on March 5, 2012.

Reclaimed Memories

The first large-scale presentation of 3/11 documentaries occurred from early to mid-October at the 2011 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. Holding the festival outside of the evacuation zone but just a short drive from Fukushima, its organizers cited their “belief in the documentary film, with its power to observe objectively and express subjectively, and our trust that the invigoration of film culture will give impetus to the world, including the disaster-hit areas” as reason to push ahead, especially in a time of struggle.

A programming sidebar entitled “Recovery Support Screening Project: Cinema with Us” screened over...
twenty documentaries focused on the events of March 11 in addition to symposia featuring activists and filmmakers. In a report from the festival, Abé Mark Nornes, Professor of Asian Cinema at the University of Michigan, observed a key visual characteristic shared by these films: a recurrence of shots captured from a moving vehicle, clearly recognizable across the films. These trucking shots capture the wake of the glacier of debris that resulted from the massive tsunami, often indicating travel from one scene to the next and imparting the sense of a road movie. Nornes observes that this prevalent use of trucking shots contrasts sharply with the recurring use of the fixed pan in footage capturing the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. Partially explained by the dangers of proximity associated with the attack sites' radioactivity as well as by the bulkiness of 1940s filmmaking tools (film stock rather than digital media), the manner in which the newsreels and documentaries of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were shot contributed greatly to how those disasters were perceived and remembered in the popular consciousness. If we can conclude anything from a comparison of the predominant shooting styles associated with the respective disasters of 1945 and 2011, we might comment that—driving along paths cleared through flattened towns and looking for people to talk with—the documentaries of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami show an especially up-close-and-personal tie to the land and a strong curiosity about people’s experiences of the disaster.

March 11, 2011 meant different things to different people—a loved one lost, a home destroyed, a livelihood rendered obsolete, or an entire night stuck at the office due to cancelled trains. In the common experience represented by the disaster, however, a collectivist spirit emerges. And although the repetition of familiar tragic accounts can take its toll on the viewer, the zeal with which these documentary filmmakers seek out stories feels like an act of preservation. And in that impulse, the documentarian is not alone.

A wreckage worker interviewed in Lucy Walker’s “The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom” explains that he always saves photographs and gravestones “hoping the families will come along and find them.” Photography plays an especially important role in Japanese domestic life, and as one travels through the country as a foreigner, it’s comforting to see the large amount of tourism practiced domestically—cameras always in tow. It should be of no surprise that photographs are considered precious possessions to be salvaged in times of emergency, saved even by those outside the family unit directly concerned. From cinema to anime and architecture, much has been written on Japan’s visual culture. But to my knowledge, hobby photography remains little explored.

Photography is introduced early in Koichi Omiya’s “The Sketch of Mujo.” In its first scene, an elderly woman retrieves a photo album from the destroyed remains of her family’s home. Flipping through the pages, she comments, “We walked a lot didn’t we?” to which her husband responds, “Yes we did. Yes, I remember. It’s our history.” In another shot, she wonders, “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.” Later in the film, we arrive at a moderately damaged home with a teenager and her mother (or grandmother) working inside, a large tugboat run aground at their doorstep. The older woman reports that three days after the quake she left the evacuation center and waded through the debris to get home, where she discovered the ship lodged outside. Stored in boxes on the second floor, the photos are mostly intact. She expresses remorse as she announces her decision to leave the area due to the danger of living near the sea and the fact that none of her family members are fishing now. Whether they survived the
devastation is unclear. Smiling over sadness behind a precautionary medical mask, the teen meekly
counters, “I love the sea. I’d want to stay here, you know.” Joy bubbles up as she speaks of jogging on
the shore. Omiya lets the moment sit as they stand in silence, before he cuts to the next scene, hidden
emotions seeping back to the surface.

Beginning “Mujo”’s coda, the soundtrack cuts out entirely as the camera dips and pans in extreme
close-up over a wall covered with salvaged photos. As this extended take continues, hovering
momentarily over individual photos, we realize the great amount of energy devoted to the collection of
these pictures from the disaster zone, but more emotionally, we see these many everyday family and
travel photos as representations of the immensity of the missing population. As we pass over a sign
asking the question, “Are any of these things yours?” we’re led to wonder whether the former owners
of these indexed memories were swept away, as well. One year after the disaster, over 3,000 people
remain unaccounted for, while more than 16,000 have been confirmed dead. Close to 400,000 are
estimated to be homeless, either due to damage or evacuation. The roving shot widens and pans to
reveal the space to be a large gymnasium, now serving as storage for unclaimed belongings, photos
wrapping the walls, bins of personal items lined up along the center of the basketball court.

“Blossom”’s approach to photographic representation relates the form to sakura (the cherry blossom),
as both are regarded as physical placeholders for memories, with photography given the sense of
active preservation or selection of memory. Interviewees recount their closest associations with the
enigmatic tree and its seasonal reemergence; a woman fondly recalls her wedding day, a man the last
sakura-viewing excursion with his mother prior to her death. A lyrical sequence of people taking
photos in prime sakura-viewing season with cameras and cellphones follows, and a man ruminates
towards an explanation: “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.” This manner of formal
comparison invokes the documentary itself and the distinct impulse of its makers, here bearing
witness through interviews and the rearrangement of footage recorded by individuals in the midst of
the earthquake and tsunami. A young teenager eloquently adds, “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 tension between people reclaiming evidence of peaceful memories, and people
recording and presenting that struggle through cinema is potent and heartbreaking.

A friend who recently returned from a visit to the affected areas in northeastern Japan commented on
her inability to broach the subject of the disaster to a survivor. What can a documentarian truly ask of
a survivor? We might consider the words of the reconstruction worker interviewed towards the end of
“Blossom,” who like so many selfless workers in the film, expresses a dedication to tracking
reconstruction in the area: “The utility poles are being put back up, and the cables are being
reconnected. I want to take pictures of the town as they’re rebuilding it.”

Tags: Abé Mark Nornes, documentary, featured, Fukushima, full-image, Japan, Koichi Omiya,
Nagasaki, sakura, The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom, University of Michigan, World War II, WWII,
Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival

About the Author
Obama Welcomes You to UFO Hotel

Published on June 12th, 2012 | by Joel Neville Anderson

“UFO in Her Eyes” (2011) screens June 13-18 at the Museum of Modern Art (the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater, T2) as part of the monthly exhibition ContemporAsian.

Fittingly dedicated to Mikhail Kalatozov’s “Soy Cuba” (“I Am Cuba”) (1964), Xiaolu Guo’s film adaptation of her second English language novel engages issues of globalization and the uniquely oppressive worlds of sheltered tradition and blindly modernizing culture through a singular fabulist aesthetic. Featuring beautiful cinematography by the Asia based Polish DP Michal Tywoniuk and an eclectic soundtrack by Mocky, “UFO in Her Eyes” (2011) presents a moving character portrait of a woman under pressure from all sides. This German-produced Chinese language feature incorporates into its experiments in narrative form stylistic elements associated with documentary as it borrows a certain flair for upending expectations of tone in ideologically charged contexts from Kalatozov’s USSR-financed film about the 1959 Cuban revolution. However, it is not only the fact that Guo presents a work of speculative fiction rather than a retelling of the recent past that her story is left so open ended. While unafraid to name names and cast the contemporary issues of a specific milieu as...
elements of a fictional microcosm, the universal path of the protagonist—upon whom much of the film’s referential weight is bestowed—performs a fantastic departure from this conversation if not a complete disavowal of identity and acceptance of the alien after realizing a necessary struggle for independence.

"UFO in Her Eyes" finds Kwok Yun (the amazing Shi Ke) in the fields of South China’s Three Headed Bird Village (which could perhaps represent the three main political entities of the story: new China, old China and America) stumble upon a rough crystal leading to a supposed alien encounter after a midday rendezvous with the town’s very married schoolteacher. A government investigator is dispatched from Beijing to investigate the sighting, an unseen motivator of floating POV shots interviewing the townsfolk. Displayed over the gaze of the official, Terminator-style text tells us she is an unmarried thirty-five-year-old laborer in the local mine. Similar parameters defining citizens according to the state appear as the officer asks the locals “what did you see on September eleventh?” Their responses say more about the structure of this small community than satisfying the audience’s curiosity regarding literal extraterrestrials, and you can sense the tension between these local familial structures and the country’s greater regime. There are also clear outsiders here such as the mute bicycle repairman from the North, but our desire for a real live alien is satisfied by the appearance of Udo Kier, the famed German character actor here cast as an American named Steve Frost who mysteriously appears injured in the village fields. Upon being dragged to safety by Kwok Yun, Frost disappears just as inexplicably, but the village soon receives word from him in the States, offering a reward to the kind woman who saved his life.

The head of the village, Chief Chang (a many times divorced local bureaucrat, as her onscreen ID text informs us) seizes the opportunity to make her little village stand out, not only promoting the site of the “UFO” sighting as a tourist attraction, but establishing Kwok Yun as a model peasant and moving to unite her with the respected schoolteacher, coupling the illiterate with the intellectual in a modern Maoist display. Although Kwok Yun does not appear to have more than a passing affection for this meek pillar of the community, the teacher is more than ready to dump his unpleasant wife, bringing her along to the town office with opposite entrances comically labelled for marriage and divorce. The stakes rise as Frost announces a visit to the village, which Chang organizes to coincide with Kwok Yun’s forced wedding just after the opening of a gaudy “UFO hotel” featuring US President Barack Obama as false mascot and endorser.

As Kier wails “Wild Is the Wind” to a karaoke beat, blood will be shed in protest against the institutional control of Three Headed Bird Village under the regime and the corporation’s watch, and Kwok Yun will make an escape. Regarding the open conclusion alluded to earlier, even if no spaceship makes liftoff by the end, it should signal no defeat for her journey.

Tags: Alien, America, Barack Obama, Beijing, China, Chinese, Cuban revolution, extraterrestrial, featured, full-image, German, I Am Cuba, Maoist, Michał Tywonik, Mikhail Kalatozov, Mocky, novel, Polish, September eleventh, Shi Ke, Terminator, Udo Kier, USSR, Wild Is the Wind

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