

# *The Theater of a Thousand Years*

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Japanese documentary filmmaker Ogawa Shinsuke, who died in 1991, was known for pushing the scale of his filmmaking to ambitious proportions. In the summer of 1987, after completing his extraordinary documentary, *The Sundial Carved by a Thousand Years of Notches: The Magino Village Story*, Ogawa confronted a relatively new problem: he had nowhere to show his film.

So he built a theater.

The Theater of a Thousand Years [*Sennen shiataa*] was a traditional structure made of dirt, logs, tatami, and thatch which the filmmakers and their fans brought from the mountains to an empty construction site in Kyoto. Built specifically for this single film, this ephemeral theater on an urban construction site was partly an experiment in exhibition, partly a last-ditch response to a fast changing film culture.

Ogawa started out as an industrial public relations documentary-maker in 1960, but left this comfortable career to make independent, political documentary. His first films — *Sea of Youth* [*Seinen no umi*], *Forest of Pressure* [*Assatsu no mori*] and *Report from Haneda* [*Gennin no hôkakusho*] — electrified the Japanese student movement, and in 1967, the director and his staff embarked on their first great experiment. They moved to a village north of Tokyo where students and farmers were waging war with the government over the construction of Narita International Airport.

When the Japanese government decided to build Narita airport they simply announced it would be put in the village of Sanrizuka, expecting the farmers living there to relocate to make way for the runways. Immediately, the farmers organized to resist, and they were soon joined by students from Tokyo. The students saw the airport in geopolitical terms — this coincided with the Vietnam war — while the farmers refused to leave land that had nurtured generations of their ancestors. In fact, any trip through the now-completed Narita Airport is not complete without a stop at Terminal #2, where one can see a field of mulberry trees in the middle of the tarmac, the land of one farmer who still refuses to give up his land.

Ogawa moved his production company to a house in the area and made what has become known as the Sanrizuka Series — seven feature-length documentaries over a ten-year period. These were cooperative efforts by filmmakers living and working communally with the farmers and students. The changing approach taken by the filmmakers, and the changing style of their films, reflected broader transformations in the relationships among these three groups: filmmakers, farmers, students. For example, at the beginning of the Narita protests, Ogawa concentrated on the sheer physical intensity of the confrontations between students, farmers and riot police.

The first film, *Japan Liberation Front: Summer in Sanrizuka* [ *Nihon kaihô senzen: Sanrizuka no natsu*, 1968] used purposefully disjunctive editing to make an "action film." While the filmmakers shot their footage from the farmers' front lines, the focus of the film was on the agitated student movement, which also constituted the filmmakers' initial audience.

As the protests dragged on and increased in scale, the character of the films changed. Instead of the raucous actions of the student protesters, the films focused more and more on the villagers. The shots became longer and longer, attending to the rhythm and interests of the farmers rather than the students. For example, in a scene in *Sanrizuka: Peasants of the Second Fortress* [ *Sanrizuka: Dai-ni toride no hitobito*], a farmer takes the film crew into the tunnels of an underground fortress. In a shot that must last a couple of minutes, he repeatedly holds a candle up to an air hole to demonstrate the ventilation system. The function of the air hole is obviously something he is proud of — indeed, it allows the farmers to live underground full-time — but the patient repetition of his demonstration and the length of the scene are difficult for many spectators. On the other hand, it clearly attends to the concerns and subjectivity of the farmers themselves.

This trend climaxes in *Heta Village* [ *Heta buraku*, 1973], which may be thought of as a turning point in the history of independent documentary in Japan. Ogawa thought of it as an "experimental documentary" and his finest film. In one extremely long take after another, the villagers talk about their daily lives and the impact the protests have had on their farms and families. The protests themselves continue, but the action of the film is confined to the village and its people.

The changes in style and focus of Ogawa's films correspond to changes in how the films were screened before the public, bringing us one step closer to the Theater of a Thousand Years. For most of their films, the members of Ogawa Productions ["Ogawa Pro"] would take a print to various regions of Japan and search for organizations that were interested in a screening. After finding a screening site, they would plaster nearby train stations, notice boards and telephone poles with posters and distribute fliers everywhere. Screenings were events larger than the film itself, and had a participatory playfulness. The film would be accompanied by speeches, chants and songs by an audience wearing helmets and waving banners. During the film, when spectators liked what they saw they screamed at the screen: "*Igi nashi!*" (Right on). When the riot police appeared on-screen, they would holler, "*Nonsensu!*". Plainclothes police were often present.

Within a year after moving to the airport site, Ogawa Productions experienced tremendous growth and evolved into one of the grandest experiments in the history of documentary film. Their reputation spread and requests for screenings came in from youth groups, labor unions, and colleges all across Japan. Prints were sent out daily for some 60 screenings a month. Ogawa Pro's main office in Tokyo was a modest 6-tatami mat apartment, but in 1969 they started thinking on the largest of scales. Drawing on their network of spectators, they established branches of Ogawa Pro in Hokkaido, Osaka, Sendai, and Kyushu. The plan was to coordinate and agitate for new screenings in their respective areas. As they established themselves, they

would begin their own autonomous productions dealing with pressing issues in their own local regions. These in turn would be distributed through the other branches of Ogawa Pro.

By the early 1970s the student movement began to die out, and the first phase of the airport neared completion. The enthusiastic, lively audiences began to evolve into something closer to a typical passive audience. Other filmmakers were finding the same problem, and from this point on the number of independent documentaries sharply decreased. In the early 1970s Ogawa Pro's branch offices lost their regional support and began requiring more money than they were taking in. By 1973, the year *Heta Village* was ready for distribution, all the branch offices had closed except the ones in Tokyo and Sanrizuka. With the end of their regional offices and a changing, diminishing audience, the filmmakers no longer had the infrastructure for distribution. Now, three to five members of Ogawa Pro would hand-carry a print for four to six weeks at a stretch. They would travel from city to city, looking for theaters, organizing their own screenings and selling their own tickets. As they screened in one city or village, they would arrange for the next site. This precluded screenings out in the smaller villages, a problem because that had become the most important context for a film like *Heta Village*.

With the dissolution of its audiences, Ogawa Pro also lost its most important means of fundraising. It decided to leave Sanrizuka and took up the invitation of a farming community deep in the mountains of Yamagata Prefecture. The farmers in this region had begun their own cultural movement in the face of urban flight and the "hollowing out" of the Japanese countryside. They were trying to rediscover the richness of their own local, rural culture, through traditional arts and the writing of both history and literature. Deeply impressed by the sympathetic portrayals of rural life in the later airport films, they invited Ogawa Pro to relocate to a small village called Magino. Ogawa seized upon the opportunity in the spirit of experimentation. Kimura Michio, one of Japan's most celebrated farmer-poets and a resident of Magino, lent the production crew an old house, and the filmmakers found a field to grow rice in — their new studio! They would save money by living communally and growing their own food. They turned out to be good farmers but discovered that the demanding work left little time for film-making.

They were only able to make shorts in the first several years, and finally completed the three-and-a-half hour *Furuyashiki-mura* in 1982. They still had to find their own spaces for screenings and a member of Ogawa Pro would accompany the film whenever possible. What helped the film's distribution more than anything was winning the critics' prize at the Berlin Film Festival, followed by taking third place in the annual top-ten list in *Kinema Junpô*, Japan's film journal. (It was one of the few documentaries ever to make the list at all.) Up to this point, Ogawa's films had fed off the student movement for subject matter, fundraising, and viewers. That energy had dissipated, leaving him dependent upon institutional recognition to create momentum and audience curiosity.

Even as Ogawa Productions became dependent on the traditional exhibition route, the Japanese film industry's infrastructure was deteriorating rapidly through

massive, systemic problems. As Japanese land prices sky-rocketed throughout the 1980s, the number of movie theaters dropped precipitously. The year Ogawa began his filmmaking career, 1960 — the same year Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* smashed all the Japanese box office records — there were over 7,000 theaters in the country. By the late 1980s there were only 2,000. In roughly the same period (1958 to 1985) attendance fell from over one billion persons to about 155 million. Many theaters in Japan are part of chains vertically integrated into the studio system, which do not pick up documentaries for distribution. Only a few small distributors are interested in documentaries and the avant-garde, but they pick up only famous European and American films. This leaves independent filmmakers — documentary and fiction alike — to distribute their own work, as much out of the inertia of tradition as default; they had always done it that way, and couldn't imagine any alternatives. After the supreme effort necessary to finish a film, the filmmakers themselves must put equal energy into carrying their film around the Japanese countryside.

This finally brings us to the Theater of a Thousand Years and Ogawa's last major film, *The Sundial Carved by a Thousand Years of Notches: The Magino Village Story* [*Sennen kizami no hidokei: Magino-mura monogatari*, 1987], which was finished after 13 years in the Yamagata village. To understand why the filmmakers went to the effort of building their own theater, some description of this impressive film is in order.

The farmers of Yamagata invited Ogawa Pro to Magino Village because they felt the filmmakers didn't really understand why the Sanrizuka farmers fought so hard for their land. In some sense, this last film is an answer to that very problem. On the surface, it is a science film about rice, using photo-microscopy, time lapse photography, and a detailed study of irrigation systems, but these are only surface-level conventions through which Ogawa tells us the story of rice. Indeed, for most urban Japanese, science could be the only way to approach an understanding of their own staple food. It was also the way the filmmakers found acceptance from the villagers. Not only did they make good rice, but they were able to show the villagers rice from an entirely new perspective through the modern technologies of optics and cinematography.

However, as one can tell from the title, *The Sundial Carved by a Thousand Years of Notches*, this is far more than a science film. Alongside this intense documentary scrutiny of rice are short, episodic narratives. These are stories that have circulated among the members of this tiny village from one generation to several centuries, and are performed by a mixture of professional and non-professional actors. For example, the story about a woman and her crazy brother features the brilliant casting of Hijikata, the dancer who founded Butoh, and Miyashita Junko, Japan's most famous softcore pornography actress. By way of contrast, the next scene has a villager and his wife reenacting the story of his father and mother digging up an ancient stone god — a large phallus, to be specific — in their orchard; they promptly hide it under the house before the kids see. The filmmakers plunge even deeper into the village's history by reenacting a peasant revolt from the 17th century (famous New Wave actors play samurai administrators and the villagers play their ancestors). Finally, they uncover the furthest reaches of village history by excavating an ancient

archaeological site where they find relics from the Jomon Period, which dates from 1,000 to 10,000 BCE. This massive four-hour documentary is ages from the frenetic immediacy of the student protest films.

I can think of few films that complicate the notion of history to such a degree. We see the competing knowledge produced by story and social science, the written records of the village heritage and the oral tales handed down through the generations, as well as fragments of history left from the furthest reaches of human experience. All of this is marked by the cycles of the rice harvest that have governed people's lives through the ages. What is truly extraordinary about this film is its concept of history — one that may not make much sense in Tokyo or Ann Arbor — as not so much a thing resurrected from the past, but something palpably alive in the present.

How could one think of watching a film that is so intimately tied to this place — both its space and its time, its rhythms, sights and its smells — in a dilapidated movie theater or high school gymnasium? This thought crossed the minds of both the filmmakers and their admirers in Osaka, where the readers of *Eiga Shinbun* (Film Newspaper) had been tracking the film's progress. Indeed, finding a place to show such a film had become exceedingly problematic. So they built their own theater.

A publicity flier for The Theater of a Thousand Years describes the motives behind building a temporary exhibition space for a single film:

Welcome to the Theater of a Thousand Years! Considering the freedom of cinema, should not the places cinema is shown have that freedom as well? This is the conception of The Theater of a Thousand Years. From the end of production to the screening of the film, most filmmakers entrust their films to the hands of other people, but here this activity is being handled from the filmmakers' side.... It's the romance of cinephiles that a theater could be devoted to a single film. This Theater of a Thousand Years is the first embodiment of what cinephiles have long dreamed of. To be specific, it could be said that this film is utterly wrapped up in the world of Magino Village in Yamagata Prefecture. The space of this theater is surely the same, and the embodiment of that dream entirely sweeps away one's feelings toward the movie theaters of today.

This "embodiment" involved an enormous amount of sweat, all volunteered. Through the efforts of *Eiga Shinbun*'s staff, the filmmakers borrowed an empty construction site in Kyoto. A young architecture student helped plan the building, using traditional designs and methods of construction. Seven hundred logs were used for the framework. Three thousand bundles of grass were brought in from the countryside for the thatched roof, along with 50 tons of mud for the walls. Next door, a famous Butoh dance troupe erected their own temporary theater — one with a modern, industrial design — and held dance performances throughout the run of the film. Ringing the outside of the theater were the tents and tarps of a local matsuri, or fair, featuring plenty of food and trinkets from the countryside. Occasionally, singers

and acoustic bands entertained the audience arriving for the screenings. Rows of tall, traditional banners — as used for sumo wrestling and kabuki theater — lined the perimeter. At the theater entrance, spectators could browse through photographs of the production, examine some of the props from the film, and buy fried noodles and home cooking from Yamagata in lieu of popcorn. The theater itself held 140 spectators, all of whom sat on pillows on the floor. Before the large screen was a hole in the ground with the ancient Jōmon pottery unearthed in the film placed as though they had come once more to light. The theater was air conditioned, but it seemed as though the cool air was rising from the hole in the ground. With the blessing of a Shinto priest, the screenings were underway.

A month later there was nothing left but the wind.

This is, perhaps, the ultimate instance of independent film distribution. Based upon the stories I've heard, it was a smashing success in terms of creating an appropriate space to experience the film. Surrounded by those mud walls and thatched roof, one could actually smell the movie, people said.

Although the Theater of a Thousand Years may have created a wonderful experience for those lucky enough to attend, its confrontation with the difficulties of showing documentary in Japan was as ephemeral as the structure itself. Occasionally, independent filmmakers attempt to circumvent the seemingly insurmountable problems of the film exhibition situation by building their own theaters. Suzuki Seijun showed his *Yumeji* in a bubble-like tent supported by air pressure. Yamamoto Masashi borrowed an empty lot amidst the Love Hotels of Tokyo's Shibuya district and constructed a theater out of fluorescent-painted junk and scrap metal for *Tenamonya Connection*. I even built a theater out of pipes and colorfully painted canvas for an event at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. However, these are only temporary, tactical solutions to the difficult problems the Japanese documentary film world faces.

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