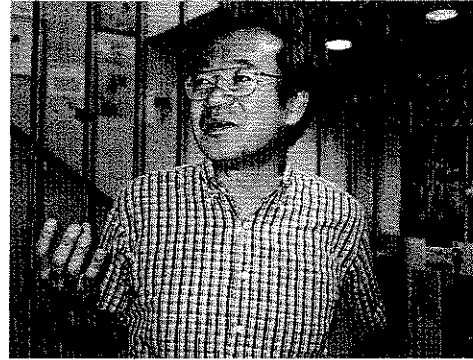


Documentarists of Japan, #23:

# Sato Makoto

Interviewer: Abé Mark Nornes



Sato Makoto

## 1. THE DAYS OF THE MINAMATA MOVEMENT: ENTERING THE WORLD OF FILMMAKING

**Abé Mark Nornes (AMN):** Let's start with school. You studied philosophy at the University of Tokyo. Did you actually go to your classes?

**Sato Makoto (SM):** Nope. I hardly ever went.

**AMN:** Japanese seem to have a strange pride about skipping classes.

**SM:** Well, for me it wasn't so much pride as it was just playing hooky. I had already started visiting Minamata in my third year of college.

**AMN:** In mid-semester?

**SM:** Yeah, in the middle of courses (laughing). I think the first time that I went was in my third year. I joined the film crew of *The Innocent Sea* (dir. Katori Naotaka, 1983) in my fourth year and was basically in Minamata for half the year.

**AMN:** Why philosophy?

**SM:** I had already been reading bits of philosophy here and there in high school so I decided from the start that I was going to study philosophy in the faculty of letters. In reality, I didn't study very seriously at all. They don't take you seriously in that department unless you are proficient in German and French. I didn't take any language courses and I spent all my energy trying to do things outside of the campus, so I really didn't go to very many classes in college. Nowadays I regret not having done more of that coursework. All those basic things they teach you, like the logical structure of things and how to approach things philosophically, they eventually become very necessary. Wouldn't you say all those things are aspects of filmmaking?

**AMN:** I couldn't agree more.

**SM:** This is a bit embarrassing, but in our third year we had to choose an area of focus and I chose Hegel. That was because

Hegel was about the only thing I knew (laughing).

**AMN:** In those days, did you have much interest in the arts?

**SM:** Let's see . . . the arts. Well, in college I wasn't involved in filmmaking but in theater. I used to put on student productions with friends, but that didn't go so well. At the same time I was personally very concerned about a lot of the social issues of the period. I went to college during the late seventies and early eighties, and during that time, if you wanted to go out there and do something about social ills, it seemed like Sanrizuka and Minamata were the only places you could go. Both movements had already passed their peaks by then, but the '78 occupation of the airport control tower in Sanrizuka happened during that time, as well as the frequent sit-ins in front of the Environmental Ministry as part of the struggle for the rights of unrecognized Minamata disease victims. The citizens' movements were still very palpable in those two places.

The initial reason I got involved with the Minamata campaign was actually through the theater. There was a man named Sunada Akira who used to do these one-man performances. He had gone to live in Minamata for ten years and decided to use the accumulation of that experience in a one-man show at the Mokubatei in Tokyo's Asakusa district, which was an old theater usually used for *naniwabushi* (a sung narrative popular during the Edo period). It was based on a story written by Ishimure Michiko. The production put out a call for help, looking for people who were both involved in theater and concerned about Minamata. That's how I came to be involved with the movement.

**AMN:** How exactly did you get involved in the Minamata movement?

**SM:** I went to Minamata to help out with Sunada's performance, but separately, I also attended workshops geared towards students and local residents at the Minamata Disease Center Soshisha. It was a program designed to foster interaction with Minamata disease patients by visiting their homes for a day



Abé Mark Nornes

or two and helping them out with their farming, and that kind of thing. Even though I was born in Aomori, my father was an office worker and I grew up in a Tokyo apartment complex. I led an entirely urban existence and really had no connection at all to life in a small fishing village. There was a part of me that was actually more stirred by and attracted to this provincial life of the fishing village than to the world of the Minamata movement. It was during that time that Katori Naotaka, who later directed *The Innocent Sea*, came to Minamata by himself because he wanted to make a film. He would say, "In any event, I am going to make this film," but no one ever took him seriously. So then Katori approached me saying, "I'm going to shoot this film in Minamata probably next year and I need some people in Tokyo to help out with production. How about it, Sato?" So it was with this casual intent to lend a hand that I first stepped into the documentary world. I actually think a lot more people than you'd expect fall into this field quite casually like I did. At the time, Minamata appealed very powerfully to my romantic sense of purpose and I was strongly attracted to it. It was like I could smell the action coming off the crew who returned from Minamata. The movement in Tokyo was sluggish, but out in Sanrizuka and Minamata they had their own problems, and it seemed like in those places things were really moving. There was still so much to be done. I would be utterly captivated by passionate accounts of how you could truly feel like part of the movement when you're out there. So naturally, I was drawn to Katori's offer to help him shoot a film in a place like that. Also, Tsuchimoto Noriaki was still doing his series on Minamata at the time, but I had been too afraid to try to get into his group.

**AMN:** You were afraid?

**SM:** Yeah, I was intimidated. I didn't think they would give someone like me the time of day. I had only been to Minamata once as a student and had no prior experience in activism up until then. I had no experience in filmmaking either and

didn't even have a clear political vision. I was convinced that there was no way that someone like myself, who was just casually attracted to the movement, could ever be accepted as part of Tsuchimoto's film group. By then, Tsuchimoto's Seirinsha Productions already consisted of a proper crew and there was no need to hire students, even for an assistant director position.

**AMN:** As opposed to Ogawa Productions . . .

**SM:** Right, nothing like Ogawa Productions (laughing). Like the, "Hey, you like films, kid? Then make me some dinner," style of recruiting. No, it was nothing like that at Tsuchimoto's group because he had a very definite theory of how his crew should be. Because I was involved in Minamata, I would of course come across Tsuchimoto at various meetings, sounding off his incisive analyses of the current situation from a cinematic vantage point, but it was like ships passing in the night. He just seemed like such a distant figure, and the members of Tsuchimoto's group were really pioneers on the cutting edge. The crew of *The Innocent Sea* was like two generations behind them. Katori Naotaka was a complete unknown then who wasn't afraid to push his luck. That's why he was able to come out to the location where Tsuchimoto was shooting his films and declare, "I'm going to make a film too. I'm going to rent a house and live here." When production actually started and the yearlong residency in Minamata began, I was there for about six months of it. Technically, I was part of the Tokyo production crew so I was in Tokyo half the time, but there was really nothing to do there. I wasn't interested in going to my classes at university either, so I would go hang out in Minamata, helping out the local fishermen, helping harvest mandarin oranges and drinking *shochu* with the villagers while listening to their stories. I would come back reporting, "I heard this guy's story and he's given us permission to shoot," etc.



shooting *Living on the River Agano*

### Sato Makoto

Born in Hirosaki, Aomori, Japan in 1957, and raised in Tokyo. Encountered documentary film when he visited Minamata as a student, and worked on Katori Naotaka's *The Innocent Sea*. While touring Japan with the film, met people who lived by the Agano River in Niigata and decided to make a film about them. Lived with seven crew members for three years and in 1992 completed *Living on the River Agano*, which won a number of awards including the Prize for Excellence at YIDFF '93. Head instructor at the Film School of Tokyo since 1999, and professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design from 2001. Served as juror for New Asian Currents at YIDFF 2001. Resided in London for one year from August 2002 with support from the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Recent publications include *Mirror Called Everyday: The World of Documentary Film* (1997), *The Horizons of Documentary Film—To Understand the World Critically* (2001), *Where Film Begins* (2002), and *Dozing London* (2004; all works published by Gaifusha).

### ■ Filmography Title/Length/Format/Crew/Production

\* indicates TV program

- 1983 *The Innocent Sea* ("Mukonaru umi: 1982 Minamata") / 81 min / 16mm / Katori Naotaka (Director), Kakesu Shuichi, Sato Makoto, Shiraki Yoshihiro, Sugita Kazuo, Higuchi Shiro / Film Kobo
- 1992 *Living on the River Agano* ("Aga ni ikiru") / 115 min / 16mm / Kobayashi Shigeru (Photography), Suzuki Shoji (Sound) / Living on the River Agano Production Committee
- 1994 \**Diary of Our Birth* ("Wagaya no shusan nikki") / 45 min / Video / Iwata Makiko (Photography), Miyazaki Masao (Co-director) / TV Tokyo "Document Human Theater"
- 1995 *I Want the Sun* ("Otentosama ga hoshii") / 47 min / 16mm / Watanabe Sho (Producer, Photography), Sato Makoto (Editing) / I Want the Sun Production Committee
- \**Children at a Small Park* ("Chisana koen no kodomotachi") / 45 min / Video / MX TV
- Tsugawa Town: Legend of the Will-o'-the-Wisp* ("Kitsunebi densetsu no machi Tsugawa") / 15min / Video / Kobayashi Shigeru (Photography) / Green Cinema
- 1996 \**Reading Tokyo in Photographs* ("Shashin de yomu Tokyo") / 90 min / Video / NHK / Kobayashi Shigeru (Photography), Daishima Haruhiko (Producer) / NHK
- Minamata Disease: Video Q&A* ("Minamatabyo bideo kyu ando e") / 30 min / Video / Excerpts from: Tsuchimoto Noriaki's Minamata Series / Siglo
- \**Rainbow Bridge: The Long Challenge of Local Independence Connecting Agriculture and the Kitchen* ("Niji no kakehashi: Daidokoro to nogyo e no nagai chosen") / 45 min / Video / Matsune Hirotaka (Photography) / TV Tokyo
- Essence of Nadya* ("Naja no mura") / 118 min / 16mm, 35mm / Motohashi Seiichi (Director), Sato Makoto (Editing) / Sasuna Film
- Sunday at a Nursery School* ("Hoikuen no nichiyobi") / 20 min / 16mm / Toyokawa Nursery School Fathers Association
- 1998 *Artists in Wonderland* ("Mahiru no hoshi") / 93 min / 16mm / Otsu Koshiro (Photography), Kubota Yukio (Sound) / Siglo
- 1999 \**10 Years Between a Japanese NGO and Banana Village* ("Nihon enu ji o to bananamura no junen") / 60 min / Video / Uryu Toshihiko, Yamada Takenori, Yanagida Yoshikazu (Photography) / NHK
- Letter from a Goddess* ("Megamisama kara no tegami") / 30 min / 16mm / Kasama Film
- 2000 *Self and Others* ("Serufu ando azazu") / 53 min / 16mm / Tamura Masaki (Photography), Kikuchi Nobuyuki (Sound) / Eurospace
- Where is Grama Zheng's Homeland?* ("Chon obasan no kuni") / 90 min / 16mm / Han Tadayoshi (Director, Photography), Sato Makoto (Editing) / Siglo
- 2001 *Hanako* ("Hanako") / 58 min / 35mm, 16mm / Otsu Koshiro (Photography), Tsurumaki Yutaka (Sound) / Siglo
- The Pleasures of Expression* ("Hyogen to iu kairaku") / 40 min / Video / Otsu Koshiro (Photography) / Siglo
- The Markets Greatest Strategy* ("Shijo saidai no sakusen") / 25 min / 16mm / Miyatake Yoshiaki (Photography) / Aomori Art Museum
- 2002 *Nojiri Hoei, Scholar of the Stars* ("Hoshino bunjin: Nojiri Hoei") / 48 min / Video / Yanagida Yoshikazu (Photography), Takizawa Osamu (Sound) / Poluke
- 2004 *And Life Goes On* ("Watashi no kisetsu") / 107 min / 16mm / Kobayashi Shigeru (Director, Photography) / Sato Makoto (Editing) / And Life Goes On Production Committee
- Memories of Agano* ("Aga no kioku") / 55 min / 16mm / Kobayashi Shigeru (Photography), Kikuchi Nobuyuki (Sound) / Kasama Film
- The Japanese SDF Dispatch to Iraq Seen Through Arab Eyes* ("Chuto repoto: Arabu no hitobito kara mita jietai iraku hahei") / 43 min / Video / Najib El-Khash / Siglo
- 2005 *Out of Place* ("Auto obu pureisu") / 137 min / 35mm / Otsu Koshiro (Photography), Kurihara Akira (Editing) / Siglo

Works directed by Sato Makoto unless otherwise noted.

## 2. COMMUNAL LIVING AND *THE INNOCENT SEA*

**AMN:** I see. So it was a very natural move to go from there to Niigata where you shot *Living on the River Agano* (1993) in that kind of collaborative mode.

**SM:** You could say that. The first thoughts that come to mind when I start thinking about making a film are basically about living conditions, like what kind of house am I going to rent and where. When we were shooting *The Innocent Sea*, the first house we lived in stood in the shadows of a cliff by this small river that ran along the border of Meshima and Fukuura. The house wasn't suitable for communal living and was basically just a bunch of connected rooms with no private space. When I was there, it was a group of four of us, and since it was that kind of open space, we always had a lot of visitors. It was a typical bachelor dwelling like the ones commonly found at Ogawa Productions, so needless to say there was a lot of drinking going on late into the evenings. The more we'd get to know people in the village, the more they would start swinging by the house with a bottle of *shochu* when they saw that we were still up. That's really similar to what went on in Ogawa Productions, I think. And that was really lots of fun; living in a place like that and talking to so many different people. You really expand your network of relationships.

**AMN:** It presumably deepens your relationships too.

**SM:** Yes, it really deepens and strengthens them. I think that my origins as a filmmaker are deeply connected to my experience of living in that house in Fukuura, leading an Ogawa-esque communal lifestyle without any personal privacy. I was laid back about it then because I was just a student, but in reality it's actually quite difficult. It's ultimately best to each have our own private lives, and then to be able to come together as a collaborative unit. Every time I've made a film, I've rented a house at the location. Even to make a TV documentary in Nagai



*The Innocent Sea*

City in Yamagata Prefecture, I rented a house there for six months. I never rent houses with private apartment-like rooms. I always rent tiny old houses with tatami matting and no partitions other than a sliding paper door. They're the very image of the Ogawa Productions' house in Magino, and strangely, that kind of house is what I have always rented. I think that probably by renting that sort of house, I sort of solidified my decision to start filming.

**AMN:** Were you thinking about Ogawa Productions at that point?

**SM:** At the time of *The Innocent Sea*, I was only an assistant director and wasn't thinking about them at all. A group of young filmmakers that physically moved to an area in order to cover it over an extended period of time was definitely a rarity back in the early '80s; especially one that was focused on a social issue like Minamata disease. The people of Ogawa Productions, as well as Tsuchimoto and the people of Seirinsha, all helped us out in various ways. The biggest help was the fact that they let us watch all the films that they had made themselves. That was the first time I got to see all of the Ogawa Productions films. From morning to night we watched the entire Sanrizuka series, one after the other.

**AMN:** Did you watch them chronologically?

**SM:** Yes, in order starting with *Summer in Narita* (dir. Ogawa Shinsuke, 1968). When we were in Tokyo, we borrowed cameraman Higuchi Shiro's family home in Makuhari as a makeshift editing room. When you parted the sliding paper doors there was quite a lot of open space, so we set up a screen there and watched films all day long. We watched all of Tsuchimoto's films on Minamata, as well as the entire Sanrizuka series by Ogawa Productions in a concentrated spurt before we started filming. We would argue over cinematic approach and methodology and discuss things like how certain scenes were shot and Tamura Masaki's camera technique. To have watched the entirety of Tsuchimoto and Ogawa's monumental

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achievements in independent filmmaking over the course of three days with the crew was truly an intense film experience.

### 3. | *LIVING ON THE RIVER AGANO AND THE INFLUENCE OF OGAWA AND TSUCHIMOTO*

**AMN:** Since Ogawa and Tsuchimoto have immediately come up, could you talk a bit about your relationship to these two filmmakers?

**SM:** Considering we set up a communal living situation on the site while filming *Living on the River Agano*, it's pretty obvious that in terms of approach and crew methodology I was influenced by Ogawa. And yet the person that I trusted and deferred to the most at the time of shooting was Fukuda Katsuhiko (former member of Ogawa Productions). I also consulted with soundman Kikuchi Nobuyuki (another former member) from the start.

**AMN:** That doesn't surprise me.

**SM:** Fukuda's ideas of how a film crew should operate, along with his very critical view of Ogawa Productions, were in a way one of my guiding principles while making *Living on the River Agano*. At that time, the people of Seirinsha and the organization of Tsuchimoto's group seemed to be far removed from my consciousness. But in actuality, the subject of my film is the same world of Minamata that Tsuchimoto had tackled. So when it came to the question of how to approach and analyze the subject of my film, it was impossible not to be conscious of Tsuchimoto's technique of capturing the reality of Minamata from the inside, through his balanced analysis of the government and the situation on the ground. And yet in terms of filmmaking methodology, I tended to think more like Ogawa, despite all its flaws and failures that had been pointed out to me countless times by Fukuda and Kikuchi. And so I tried to come up with our own working organizational

structure. Another time, Iizuka Toshio came to visit once, right after he had quit Ogawa Productions. I was never really smitten with Ogawa Productions to begin with, but I was always conscious of Ogawa's presence in Kaminoyama city, just on the other side of Iide Mountain when we were in Niigata. I would think to myself that we should avoid becoming like Ogawa Productions at all costs. But looking back, I do recognize that ultimately we ended up doing very similar things and it caused a lot of problems among the crew over power structure and hierarchy.

**AMN:** And we cannot forget the issue of money, can we?

**SM:** The biggest difference in terms of our production styles was the fact that we never borrowed money to fund our films; we only collected donations. For example, you can ask to borrow one hundred thousand yen and of course get a loan, but you won't be able to pay it back. But if you ask to be given one hundred thousand yen, no one will give it to you because it's too much; so the upper limit for donations becomes ten thousand yen. So, for example, if you want to raise ten million yen, you'd need to solicit donations from one thousand people, which is an awful lot of work. I thought it was an impossible endeavor, but the director Yanagisawa Hisao and his assistant director Kobayashi Shigeru had actually succeeded in funding films in this way. This genuinely good-natured director who was adroit at cultivating relationships, had at that point already funded four independent films by going around bowing his head and writing letters, collecting lists of names and doing the rounds at organizations, asking each person to donate ten thousand yen. In the case of Ogawa Productions, they borrowed money for their films by capitalizing on the charismatic persona of Ogawa himself. Under the shelter of his influence, his crew would take out loans, which they ended up not being able to repay. They were borrowing money with the foreknowledge that they would not be able to repay it, so needless to say, when Ogawa died he left behind a debt of



*Living on the River Agano*

about a million dollars. So our thinking at the time was to avoid ending up like Ogawa by not borrowing, and to try to raise money through donations as much as possible. That's why it became necessary to set up a Production Committee, like a sort of citizens' organization (dedicated to raising funds).

**AMN:** You know, it's striking that when most people start talking about documentary in Japan, talk always turns to the work of Ogawa and Tsuchimoto. Sometimes Hara Kazuo and Suzuki Shiroyasu, but always Tsuchimoto and Ogawa.

**SM:** In my case, I started filmmaking amidst a vortex of direct influences from Tsuchimoto and Ogawa. Because I was inside Tsuchimoto and Ogawa's intense sphere of influence, I feel I wasn't able to see the diversity of Japan's larger documentary scene, which spread out like the skirt of a mountain, far beyond my limited scope. At that time I didn't have the opportunity to view any other documentaries, and didn't realize that Japanese documentaries were diversified until much later. For me, it seemed like the first task when starting to make my own film, was how to tackle Ogawa and Tsuchimoto who were spread out before my eyes like a huge wall. Also, at that time I think I was receiving subtle suggestions

about the possibility of moving beyond the Tsuchimoto-Ogawa paradigm from Fukuda Katsuhiko, who had by then ventured into making his own films after struggling within the communal vortex of Ogawa Productions.

**AMN:** Did you think about Tsuchimoto and Ogawa for films after *Living on the River Agano*? These later films use different methods, staffs, and approaches to documentary.

**SM:** Yes, yes. After *Living on the River Agano*, I became naturally able to come up with completely different methods from Tsuchimoto and Ogawa. Even though it was tiny, I was able to establish a base by then, too. I became aware of the fact that if I continued in the same style, it was inevitable that I would end up like Ogawa Productions. And to be honest, that style of moving into a place to do the shoot was so exhausting that I knew it wasn't going to last.

**AMN:** And it must only get tougher as you get older.

**SM:** Right. I remember thinking after the first screening of *Living on the River Agano* that I never wanted to make a film in that way ever again, or rather, I just can't. It had been three years of communal living with so many problems with the crew along the way. I remember thinking then for the first time what

an amazing achievement it is for Ogawa to have continued in that communal method of production for so long. It occurred to me that within that communal living situation, Ogawa himself must have been so incredibly lonely. Not because of former crewmembers like Kikuchi and Fukuda criticizing him, but on a totally different dimension of isolation. Having lived in groups for over twenty years of his life, I began to imagine that it must have been Ogawa himself who was most tormented by the recurring question, "Why am I doing this?" So that is how I came to feel justified in taking an approach with the crew and filmmaking that was completely different from Ogawa.

#### 4. | TAMURA MASAKI'S CAMERAWORK AND | SELF AND OTHERS

**AMN:** One thing I find deeply fascinating is the fact that you used cameramen Tamura Masaki and Otsu Koshiro, both of whom are deeply associated for their work for Ogawa and Tsuchimoto.

**SM:** That's right (laughing). I was just in Israel with Otsu for the Edward Said film I am making now.

**AMN:** What is the difference between working with Tamura and Otsu? Was there any strategy behind these choices?

**SM:** No, there was no clear strategy regarding those decisions.

**AMN:** After watching *Self and Others* (2000), I thought Tamura was the perfect choice for cameraman. Because it is a documentary about still photography, you have this cinematographer who has always emphasized time and the flow of time in his work. That was brilliant.

**SM:** I had wanted to work with Tamura for a long time. Another way of putting it is, I didn't think that film would have been made possible with any cinematographer other than Tamura.

**AMN:** Why is that?

**SM:** I knew from the start that the key to the film's success wasn't just about how to go about shooting the motif of still photography. Capturing the absence of Gocho Shigeo was a big obstacle for us, and I couldn't think of anyone other than Tamura to pull that off. *Self and Others* was the kind of film where the crew determined the style as we went along. I had been discussing the film with the soundman, Kikuchi, from the time I first came up with the idea to make it. I wanted to do something that was completely different from the standard documentary without the usual biographical critiques where some photography expert comes out and talks about the subject. We talked about wanting to make a film in which subtle discrepancies between the visual image and recorded sound, like of voices and things, would create nuance and stir the imagination. We wanted this to be the basis for the film's montage.

**AMN:** His still photography often captures the very instant of a meeting between subject and object. But in your film very few people appear. That contrast was marvelous. It reminded me of *A.K.A. Serial Killer* (dir. Adachi Masao, et al., 1969). How were you thinking about landscape? With the absence of the main character, as well as anyone else, the camera faces primarily toward landscapes.

**SM:** What I was thinking about was not a film about Gocho Shigeo, but a film about the landscapes that he saw. At that point Gocho had already passed away seventeen years earlier, so we would go to places where he may have been to shoot the landscapes that he was no longer able to see. In other words, the landscapes of seventeen years ago and the landscapes of today are totally different, and that is what we wanted to capture. Tamura thought it was an interesting idea and agreed to go with me to these places. When we got there, regardless of the fact that it was completely different from the "image of absence" that I had in mind, Tamura was immediately intrigued. He would lithely take his camera and capture, for example, the wind

that was blowing there at the time, the clouds trickling in, the cascading waves. Tamura's camera is able to capture the feeling that a specific place has. I'd go to the location repeatedly and think about Gocho Shigeo and how to translate that visually, and then Tamura would intuitively grasp an image completely different from my directorial intent. I think that is the most impressive thing about Tamura's camerawork. That is the logic behind his cinematographic framework.

Gocho's voice, which you hear at the end of my film, is something that I found during my first research visit to his family home. It was recorded onto a cassette tape. I remember hearing that voice and thinking, "With this tape, I might be able to construct a film." The quality of the voice and the recorded words were amazing. Abstracted words like greetings and numbers were recorded; even a question projected into the void asking, "I wonder how my voice is being heard?" To me it almost felt like it had been scripted by Terayama Shuji. It was so full of feeling and seemed like a mysterious puzzle that had been thrown out for someone to catch.

But then Tamura said, "Don't let me hear that until the very end," and I understood why. It meant that he didn't want to be tied to the image of that voice during the shoot. Gocho Shigeo was a man that none of us in our crew had ever met, and we had only seen a handful of photos of him. And yet that voice alone was so intense that it conjured up Gocho's fleshly form and appearance as though he were still present. What we cannot see, like the nuances of voice and speech—basically what is hinted at by sound—reinforces the idea of a person's very absence leaving behind hints of his former existence. What we can see, like the wind, the waves, and the way light pours out, are developed images that we just arbitrarily imagine. These are ideas that became very important to me when thinking about how an individual's aura is felt in my films. Following *Self and Others*, my film *Memories of Agano* (2004) dealt with that as well. I think that they are both films that work out within a very

delicate balance.

**AMN:** The dynamics of sound and image are definitely an essential part of documentary.

**SM:** Yes, that's right. That is why I get so hung up on photography. A non-moving image leaves itself wide open to noises and voices. With the lack of motion comes the stimulation of imagination. There is so much power in the movement of images. Even the blink of an eye can hold a great deal of power. However the photographs of Gocho Shigeo stare back at us without blinking. We experience time completely differently from how we do in an ordinary human encounter. Through the experience of this inescapable and awkward sense of time, we are left pierced by his incisive gaze. This is a form of expression specific to still photography, and when I incorporated that into my film, it gave birth to a mysterious new sense of time that arose from the increasing weight that sounds and voices carried when there was no movement. That became the main direction of my films, and I think I gradually wandered off from the documentary path.

**AMN:** What about Otsu?

**SM:** I made *Artists in Wonderland* (1998) and *Hanako* (2001) with Otsu, and the upcoming *Out of Place* (2005) will be our third film together. The funny thing about Otsu's camerawork is that his rushes always leave a bad impression. Instead of doing close-ups or coming up with elaborately photogenic compositions, he always maintains a moderate position. It must be that he is trying to maintain a fresh perspective on the overall atmosphere of every scene, but in the rushes the series of middle shots all start to look the same to me. But as I get deeper into the editing, all those middle shots suddenly start appearing very fresh and vivid. It's difficult for me to grasp the essence of Otsu's camerawork until I have thoroughly gone through the editing process. It was in the making of *Artists in Wonderland* that I became fully aware of the strength of Otsu's cinematography.



## 5. | QUESTIONING THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS OF EXPRESSION IN ARTISTS IN WONDERLAND AND HANAKO

**SM:** The budget for *Artists in Wonderland* was on a much larger scale than anything I had worked on before, so I was able to spend quite a lot of time during the location scout going around to various facilities for the disabled. As the director, I spent a great deal of time worrying about how to make a film that isn't about showcasing the talented artworks of a handful of disabled people and saying, "Oh look at the great art they are creating despite their handicaps." I was concerned about how to go about shooting the site of artistic creation, and also wanted to give people an opportunity to think about what "talented" really means. That was when I first heard about Shige. For a human being to be compelled to create by forces beyond one's control—not because the act has a certain meaning or because it's work or because some teacher tells you to do it, but because you wouldn't be able to live without it—that to me is the fundamental basis of creative expression. The act itself has no meaning. But because it is an act without meaning or value, when the created work is distanced from the creator and displayed somewhere, it is able to move people who have no connection to it at all. For example, the art that the mentally disabled are doing has no intrinsic meaning. It is called "obsessive activity" and is basically just repetition. Likewise, Shige just writes the same letters over and over again. The proper thing to do as an educator is to tell him to stop, and from the standpoint of physicians, the point is to come up with the best approach to preventing the obsessive activity. So from the medical standpoint, Shige's gigantic memo is clearly just garbage. And to make matters more difficult for them, it deals with sexuality rather than portraying an ideal world. Shige is going ahead and doing something that we aren't supposed to look at or talk about in front of other people. But



*Artists in Wonderland*

if you ask me if I have thought about those kinds of things, the truth is I have. All twenty-three year old boys are thinking about getting closer to girls.

**AMN:** It's so utterly typical!

**SM:** Right. It's something that everyone is thinking about but is always confined to something you do in secret at home. That is why when people who don't know anything about Shige encounter his artwork for the first time, it is possible for them to feel an intense impact and see themselves reflected in the work. His artwork is completely outside of the bounds of the commonsense logic of art and education, like the idea that pictures need to have a certain form or that when communicating something it needs to be in sentences rather than random letters. This is actually very similar to what modern art was concerned with. Modern art was also about artists who had some compelling need to create, and expressed themselves not through standard artistic means but by breaking that very mold, like in the case of found objects, extraordinary sizes and in some extreme cases, even in the form of absence or negation. These kinds of art had an intense impact on a certain group of people, but as for the other 90 percent of the population who reacted to it with incredulity, it seemed that much of modern art amounted to nothing more than self-satisfaction for the artist. However, some of these works contain the sense that they were created by an urge for expression that the artist was unable to control. I think that *Artists in Wonderland* and *Hanako* might have been most appreciated by modern artists because they can relate to it.

In the case of the food art in *Hanako*, the only problem was that her chosen medium was food. If it had been clay, it would have been an impressive sculpture, or if she had worked with flowers, it would have been a flower arrangement; but working with leftover food creates a problem. That is because you have to get past the common rule of most normal households of: "Don't play with your food." What I found most interesting was



Hanako ©Kawauchi Rinko

the fact that Hanako's mother, Chisa, thought that her daughter playing with her food was fascinating. There is a certain social expectation that households with disabled family members should be upright and pure of heart, striving nobly in their day-to-day struggle. Outsiders look at them and say, "Oh, how hard things must be for you! Hang in there because I'm here to support you!" From the point of view of the family, it's like, "What do I need to hang in there for?" I wanted to challenge the consensus view of people with disabilities by taking an action that is considered by society to be an illness (obsessive activity), and turn it into a fascinating act of creativity that is capable of moving others. I saw this as an opportunity to destroy or overcome the borders that define society's basic assumptions regarding the disabled. It is possible to turn two negatives into a positive and reverse the situation. Of course the artists themselves have no idea that what they are doing is an act of expression; they just can't help but do what they do. And that carries a certain power. Modern artists all start out creating because of some uncontrollable impulse, but soon they start to get worried about what their next concept should be (laughing). The instant various calculations come into play, expression is corrupted. It's a moment in which everything brilliantly goes to rot. That is the dilemma of modern artists and the reason that they are both enchanted by and fearsome of people who can continue to do the same repetitive tasks with such a purity of intent.

**AMN:** This is not so different from the creation of documentaries, isn't it?

**SM:** I sometimes think that my filmmaking is very similar to what I've just discussed. Talking to you like this, it seems like my themes have changed over the years and it may appear that I have evolved and progressed as a filmmaker. But if I really think about it, at the end of the day what was most interesting and fun for me was actually my first film, *Living on the River Agano*, and the same film was also what was most difficult and trying for me. Since then I've played around with a lot of different theories, but ultimately I think I've pretty much been doing the same thing. The range of films I want to make keeps getting more and more segmented and I have strangely become more specialized. Meanwhile, I feel more and more distanced from the most important thing, which is the compulsion to create, the uncontrollable urge. When I am shooting yet another film, it's like I am taking on another homework assignment. There's harmony and division within the crew, and while talking to others the idea for yet another movie comes into being. It may just be that my standards are progressively slipping (laughing), but nevertheless I can't live without continuing to make films. It's similar to the modern artists' dilemma in that the very first creative effort always seems to retain more passion and strength.



*Memories of Agano*

## 6. | DOCUMENTARIES ARE DICTATED BY THEIR CREW

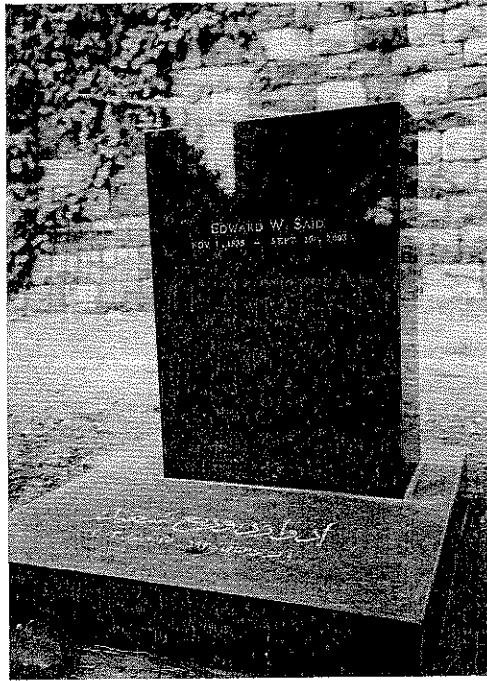
**AMN:** *Memories of Agano* (2004) is very much about absence—people, fields, stories, songs and buildings receding into absence. In this sense, *Memories of Agano* may be a sequel to *Living on the River Agano*, but it also looks and feels like a sequel to *Self and Others*. In fact, when you started out to make *Memories* you had planned to concentrate on another still photographer, right?

**SM:** When we first started making the film, the rough title was *Memories of Agano: Remnants of Meiji*. By remnants of Meiji, we meant the glass photographic plates of the Niigata landscape from the late Meiji to early Taisho era (1910s) left behind by photographer Ishizuka Saburo. Using those old black and white photographs as a motif, we started out making the film with the same concept as Gocho Shigeo in *Self and Others*. As always, the crew is invaluable when first starting to conceptualize the film, and to be perfectly honest, the first person I consulted when starting to plan *Memories of Agano: Remnants of Meiji* was Tamura. I always write letters, and I had written to Tamura for help when making *Self and Others*. He always responds with, “Let’s meet up for some idle talk.” We basically just go out drinking and it ends up being a very long discussion in which we patiently wait for something to ripen. 90 percent of it is just alcohol consumption (laughing), but a lot of ideas are spun out

during those sessions. So with *Memories*, I consulted with Tamura again because films depend entirely on who you work with.

**AMN:** Especially with the documentary.

**SM:** Yes. That’s why I knew that *Memories of Agano* would be a completely different film under Tamura than *Living on the River Agano*, which was made with Kobayashi Shigeru. Tamura’s response was very lucid and he said, “I’m not sure I am the one who should be shooting this. I think you know who you should be working with.” Of course I realized I should be working with Kobayashi, but the idea of working with him again was very nerve-wracking for me. I had lived with him in our communal living situation while shooting *Living on the River Agano*, and there had been many clashes and fights. I felt it would be very taxing to team up with him again. And besides, ten years had passed since we had last worked with each other, and during that time both of us had made several different films. I thought that in those years our approaches to film had started to deviate somewhat. Whereas I had grown increasingly interested in ephemeral things like auras, sounds and absence, Kobayashi had been consistently pursuing very concrete and visible things like the physically handicapped and coal mines. Yet Tamura insisted that I should face Kobayashi one more time, so I wrote him a very long letter. It turned out to be a good opportunity to reflect on the last decade because at the same time there was a retrospective being screened at Cine Wind in



*Out of Place*

Niigata to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of *Living on the River Agano*. Kobayashi and I talked it over at length and eventually decided to work together on it. Just as we started up in May of 2003, Kobayashi suffered a stroke. I went to England for a year and during that time our funding fell through so I had to put together a budget again and reapply to the Agency for Cultural Affairs for grant money. I came back from England about two years ago, and things really started picking up again and we decided to shoot the film.

**AMN:** What I find interesting is the way *Self and Others* is trying to express something about absence, right? And so is *Memories of Agano*. Your approach to documentary is increasingly indirect.

**SM:** Yes, that's true. Kobayashi Shigeru's camera always develops a rich relationship with the photographed subject. Since in actuality, the cameraman is always the one who has the loudest voice and is in control of the set, it's only natural that the atmosphere of the set gravitates toward him. However, this time around the subject of our film was not the people of Agano, but the places and climates that they used to inhabit. This makes it more difficult to cultivate relationships with what you are shooting. Kobayashi and I both found this to be very stimulating and interesting when working together again on this film. Kobayashi had fully matured as a cameraman after having gone through the experience of falling ill and recovering after being told that he may be paralyzed from the waist down.

Despite the fact that in this film, his camera's subject was the landscape, he boldly challenged himself to start a dialogue with it. Not only that, this was not just any landscape but the landscape we had inhabited together for three years and stared at to the point of exasperation. So naturally, our illusions and fondness for this place was extraordinary. Kobayashi's shots would be overflowing with his feeling for the landscape and I would focus on how to dry those emotionally drenched shots in the editing process. We would play catch with each other in this way, and it all felt very fresh.

## 7. | THE LATEST FILM, *OUT OF PLACE*

**AMN:** What about with your new documentary on Edward Said, who is no longer with us?

**SM:** On my second location shoot in Israel, I consciously shot a lot of landscapes. I also visited a lot of refugee camps and the interview format with refugees was unavoidable. When you ask people questions like, "Since when have you been forced to leave Palestine and live as a refugee?" it is inevitable in the editing process that the film becomes very journalistic. Said's mantra of "two people in one land," the idea of two different tribes of people living together in one country, is a logic that appears to work out only from a very distanced perspective. Unless we pull away from the individual problems of what to do about the settlements in Gaza, or the questions of accountability over the

bloodshed in Jenin, there is no room to entertain the possibility of coexistence. And that is why somewhere along the line I feel a need to distance myself from the journalistic vantage point in order to concretely outline the actual borders that exist between the two peoples. Of course, there are both visible and invisible borders. The visible borders are things like the overtly visible wall Israel is building now to divide the country, but the invisible borders are what Said directly focused on as problems. Countless invisible walls exist between people. As one of the ways of overcoming an invisible wall, Said suggested, for example, the idea of “two people in one land” in which instead of drawing up physical boundaries between the two, both sides retain their pre-existing walls and coexist. I think he was an advocate of that possibility. That is why I am beginning to think that it is impossible to talk about Said’s ideas by taking the journalistic approach and visiting one refugee camp after another. While incorporating into the film’s foundation the direct testimonies and voices of people remembering Said, I want to continue exploring the theme of absence by capturing indirectly the things that resurrect in the mind his former presence.

## 8. | OTHER POSSIBILITIES: CRITICISM AT HOME

**AMN:** Finally, I’d like to turn to your documentary criticism, especially your book *The Horizons of Documentary* (“Dokyuumentarii no chihei,” Gaifusha, 2001). This is quite an ambitious work. I find the close textual analysis in this book extremely impressive. What was the occasion for embarking on this project?

**SM:** The book was newly written because Ogi, the president of Gaifusha, asked me to write an easy to understand book that explains documentaries. The initial project was for a 200-page book analyzing about twenty documentaries that could

be easily marketed to students. So after receiving the commission I started writing about Ogawa Productions’ *Narita: Heta Village* (1973), and that chapter alone ended up taking up half the book’s allotted pages (laughing). The way that I write is similar to my filmmaking in that I am rather verbose and have trouble making things black and white. But I believe social issues and human beings in general are very difficult to simplify into black and white categories, and tend to exist in a gray zone. It is the purpose of film to display the appearance of hopelessly contradictory things as they are, and it is the purpose of television and journalism to add explanation and analysis and reduce these things to information. In film, it is not possible to reduce because what is important is that the problem without resolution is portrayed as it is. For example, the question of why there is so much warfare in this world is not something that can be answered or resolved. There are just so many paradoxes lying around that we can’t really do anything about, and the more you observe these things, the more you lose sight of the possibility of resolution. It is the objective of film to present that as is. I think Amos Gitai once said something along those lines. I thought that in order to take the next step, it was incredibly important to critically reevaluate the filmmakers, their films and history. And Markus, since you have been doing research on Ogawa Productions, I am sure you will understand this well, but out of all of Ogawa’s films *Narita: Heta Village* (dir. Ogawa Shinsuke, 1973) is the most difficult to grasp. It’s quite possible that even Ogawa himself rolled out the film without fully recognizing its true power, and that those of us who came across it later are the only ones astonished by it. So in other words, it was only when I started getting into the analysis of those kinds of films that I came to realize this was going to be a very long book. I do think that for a book, its degree of comprehensiveness is still quite low though. While writing this book, I thought a lot about *Self and Others*. For me, the act of criticism ultimately comes back to my own films. As I

wrote in the book's afterword, I began my film career on the outskirts of the base of a monolithic mountain range of independent cinema created by Tsuchimoto and Ogawa, and knew nothing of Asian and foreign cinema—not even American and French films—when I started out. I began with a very limited scope and the only thing in my head at the time was how to get beyond the mountains left behind by those two. When the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival began in 1989, it opened my eyes to the various mountain ranges around the globe, with the foot of a mountain extending from Asia to the rest of the world. For once every two years in Yamagata, it became possible to experience the vast array of documentaries from around the world for the first time in Japan.

**AMN:** It was quite sudden, wasn't it?

**SM:** Yes, it was very sudden and we were all a bit bewildered by it, but because of it we were able to humbly realize that what we had been doing wasn't anything new and had already been done elsewhere for quite some time. It was my intention to write about my involvement with the Yamagata Film Festival and what it has accumulated over the years. After all, the possibilities of documentary were made that much wider by it. I felt that for the next generation of Japanese filmmakers, it was crucial that they looked beyond Tsuchimoto and Ogawa and looked toward the different worlds spread out before them in order to take the next step. I figured that if I compiled all of this into a book, then the text could potentially become a challenge for the next generation of filmmakers to overcome, by providing them with the basis for critically reassessing their predecessors. There was no book like that in Japan before. Writing the book was much more difficult than I had imagined, but in the process of writing I was able to listen to and read about the various directing styles and film theories of many different filmmakers. And as a director, it was beneficial to have dialogues with other filmmakers about their approaches to film,

relationships with their cinematographers, and methodologies, things like that. Through these dialogues, I needed to come up with my own conclusions and viewpoints in order to put it all together in writing, which was an invaluable experience. This experience has provided me with fertile soil for my subsequent films and the basis upon which I may take my next step. It has also become a source of pressure in terms of not letting me make films that are too patently obvious.

**AMN:** Will you write more books?

**SM:** I don't know about that. I might if someone asks me to, but since writing isn't my real occupation, I have to say I would rather be making films. Now that all those theories of filmmaking that I was groping about for have been expressed in book form, I think the next step for me now is to experiment with those various approaches and methodologies in the production of my own films.

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—Translated by Iyobe Kiwa

#### **Abé Mark Nornes**

Associate Professor at the University of Michigan in the US. Served as a coordinator for YIDFF since 1990. He co-programmed a number of major retrospectives, including *Media Wars: Then & Now* (YIDFF '91), *The Indigenous Peoples' Film & Video Festival* (YIDFF '93), and *7 Spectres—Transfigurations in Electronic Shadows* (YIDFF '95). His *Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era through Hiroshima* was published University of Minnesota Press in 2003. He has forthcoming books on Ogawa Productions and the relationship of film and translation.