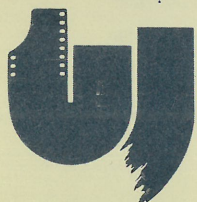


Documentary Box

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山形国際ドキュメンタリー映画祭'93

YAMAGATA International Documentary Film Festival '93

Documentarists of Japan (First in a Series)

An Interview with Haneda Sumiko

The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival plans to publish a series of interviews with Japanese documentarists. Our first interview is with Haneda Sumiko, Japan's most outstanding woman filmmaker. Haneda discusses her entry into Iwanami Productions, which coincides with a radically new kind of documentary method that came out of Iwanami. Though little is known about these films outside of Japan, their utterly candid, spontaneous style predates direct cinema and cinema verite by nearly a decade. Haneda also talks about her career as an independent filmmaker following her retirement from Iwanami, including her newly completed film, *Kabukiyakusha Kataoka Nizaemon (Kabuki Actor Nizaemon Kataoka)*, which is about one of Japan's premiere Kabuki actors. She describes this as a "private film" — private because it was never intended to be shown to audience! She simply admired Nizaemon so much that she wanted to make this visual record to give it to him. This, combined with its eight hours running time, makes it quite unique in the history of cinema. The following has been excerpted from a conversation in a Tokyo coffee shop, summer 1992.

— Interviewed by Abé Mark Nornes

I joined Iwanami Productions after it was formed in 1950. For the first three years or so I worked as a book editor. At that time, concentrating solely on film production was not economically viable for the company, so they branched out into publishing as well. So as a result, I only actually got involved in actual filmmaking in 1953 or thereabouts. At first I wrote scenarios and scripts and the like, then worked as an assistant director, and finally became a director. I was involved in the making of about 80 films for Iwanami Productions. There are some where I only did the scenario, others where I edited, others where I did all the work... There's not much I didn't do. I worked at Iwanami Productions until I was 55 years old, then became an independent.

Out of the films I worked on at Iwanami, I think the most interesting are those made during those first formative years of the company: *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi (Children in the Classroom/1954)*, which I worked on as an assistant director to Hani, and *Mura no fujin gakkyu (Village Women's Classroom/1957)*, my first work as a director. As anyone who has seen *Mura no fujin gakkyu* can tell, the Japan of that time was extremely poor. All the rural farming villages were rather like the one shown in the film. But about ten years after that, Japan's economy started to grow at a rapid rate, and the condition of the villages changed dramatically. Following this economic growth, most films produced by companies tended to become PR showcases for those companies. For me, that wasn't very interesting work. I'm thankful that most of my work was involved with productions about traditional Japanese culture and arts, as opposed to a PR film for a company or some other thing that like.

There are probably some people who will take offense at what I'm about to say, and for that I apologize, but documentary films made in Japan before Iwanami started producing simply weren't all that interesting. The technique and methodology of the people making these films wasn't much different from drama... For example, if you say "Pour tea" here, the camera is set up, the director says "All right, pour the tea", and it's filmed this way. If you say "Make a phone call", then you make a phone call. If you think about it, this method of filming really isn't any different from a dramatic performance. Even though the subject being filmed is not a drama, the methodology being used isn't much different from that used for a drama. So, if I may say so, there were many boring films being made.

When Iwanami Productions was started, the industry itself needed a newness, a freshness. The founder of Iwanami Books, Iwanami Shigeo, wanted to contribute not only to the publishing world but to the film world as well. That

desire was the beginning of Iwanami Productions. There were many young staff members, but the one who really stood out was Hani Susumu. Both he and Kobayashi Isamu, who was a senior executive for both Iwanami Books and Iwanami Productions, had been recruited from Kyodo News Services. The people working at Iwanami Productions were so new that there wasn't even a single person with film experience! Although the directors and execs were people who were career filmmakers, all of the new staff members knew nothing about movies. Hani and I were the same. At first, Hani and I worked as editors of a book series called *Shashin bunko* (Photo Library). As the amount of work involving film gradually increased, Hani soon moved over to the film division. I was still editing books when Hani recruited me to be the assistant director on *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi*.

Hani started work on *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi* right around the time Arriflex cameras began to be used, and he used an Arriflex with a telescopic lens attached to it. He did this because if the camera is close, the subject being filmed tends to get nervous and excited, but if filmed from a distance, the camera is not as threatening and the subject can be filmed in a more natural state. We used this method for *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi*, filming the children with a camera we brought into the classroom with us. We were able to film the children as they were, acting naturally. That kind of naturalness, that kind of unartificiality had not been seen in Japanese documentaries before. Of course, there was a naturalness in news films, but it was only people running around screaming about some major event... It's only natural for people to ignore a camera at a time like that, but never before had anyone captured people living out their ordinary lives naturally, without any staging, on camera. At the time, everyone was like that. British documentaries, indeed, any documentary, were made that way. Since we had studied British documentaries, that was the only methodology we had. This is why Hani chose a totally different method to work by. The reason he was able to do it was because since the company was young, there was still a sense of adventure and experimentation, and also because Hani occupied a special place in the company, they basically gave him *carte blanche*. It was the unspoken rule in the Japanese film world of the time that deviating from standard form would not be allowed. In other words, there was a set opinion, a set rule, about what a "film" was and how it should be made. If a person didn't follow that rule, he was called "incompetent", "unskilled", "worthless", "useless",

or something similar. Since most directors were afraid of such comments and reviews, and would be boycotted by their staff from doing so, they were never able to experiment. But because of Hani's position he was able to get away with it. Still, when *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi* was being filmed, everyone was saying things like, "If it's filmed like that there's no way to cut it". In the end, though, it turned out to be a great film. *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi* caused quite a sensation, and even received a good review in *Kinema Junpo*. It became the stepping stone for Hani's career.

Although I'd seen movies, I never thought they were very interesting, so the idea of making movies hadn't occurred to me. I mean, I hadn't been a fan of the movies when I was a little girl or anything, so I hadn't felt any attraction towards movies; I wasn't really pulled toward films in any way. But when I was working with Hani, I thought, "Hey, this is interesting". I also thought that I didn't want to make movies like those that had been made in the past — a "filmed image", that is, something staged. I wanted to use what I had learned through working with Hani in *Mura no fujin gakkyu*. That's why I went to a village where there was nothing, talked with the women who would be the organizers of the women's classroom for the village, and really made such a classroom. We started out working as organizers. Then we made such a group with the mothers of the village, and stayed alongside them, filming them as they/we studied. That's why even though the finished product is short, we stayed in that farming village for two months. It was because of such contact and interaction that we were able to capture that particular image. Since then, I've made it my policy that whenever I make a film, I try to build up a sincere attitude of mutual trust with the people I'm going to film. Of course, real documentarists always try to do so, and probably take such an attitude for



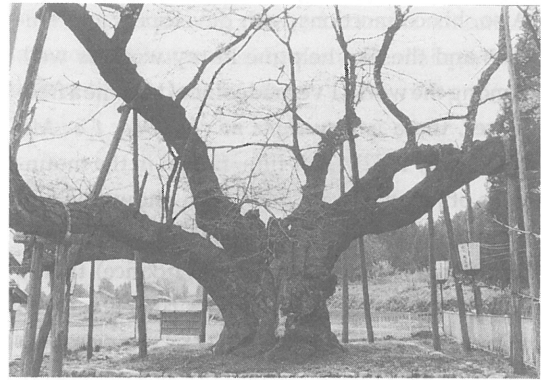
Ode to Mt. Hayachine (Japan, 1972)

granted. But, then and now, there are plenty of people who don't work that way.

Both *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi* and *Murano fujin gakkyu* were films planned by the Ministry of Education. As a result, the finished films were put into audio-visual libraries around the country. In those days, the American occupation forces, stressing the need for AV education, had made AV libraries in every prefecture in the country. All the films made under the Ministry of Education were placed in those libraries and screened at schools and the like, most likely as part of "social education". For example, there were movements similar to that of the "women's classroom" across the country. Then, the people in these movements would see *Mura no fujin gakkyu*, learn from it, and say, "Let's start a women's classroom in our own village or whatever". In one sense, that was one result of the democratic educational ideas introduced into post-war Japan by the Americans. (Of course, Japanese education has changed a lot since then.) While there are indeed many streams in the Japanese women's movement, the "women's classroom" is not what you would call feminism, but rather a movement that builds up and is built up slowly, changing and being changed by its primary members, the rural farming women. It's not a women's labor movement, it's not feminism, it's just one way that has changed Japanese women (and shows how much they have changed).

Before the war, Japanese law stipulated that any feature film had to be screened with an educational film. As a result, there were quite a few educational films being produced. In that field, there were two or three women directors. When I started working in the film industry, I guess there were still only three or so. We never worked together, though. The director of the then-famous *Shinkuu no sekai* (*The World of Vacuum*/1953), Nakamura Rinko, was our senior. I believe she made many scientific films. Also, there was Tokieda Toshie (still active today). Tokieda and I were Iwanami Productions' two women directors.

A lot of unique directors have come out of Iwanami Productions. At first, Kuroki Kazuo was also at Iwanami. He always worked on a grand scale. Even if it was an industrial PR film, most people would be small and quiet about it, but he always big and exaggerated, like this:



The Cherry Tree with Grey Blossoms (Japan, 1977)

BAM! (spreads out arms wide and laughs). There were times when he went overbudget and crashed, but at any rate, he always worked on a big scale. That's why, even if they were sometimes a little strange, he always made works that were appealing. He was always using new images, or at least those that weren't so old that they were cliched. There isn't anyone else who shot images like him. On one level, Kuroki's works are modernist.

Around then, there was a group called "Ao no Kai" (The Blue Club), made up of Kuroki, Higashi Yoichi, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, Ogawa Shinsuke, and others, bold directors who had broken out of Iwanami. Theirs was a group of rebellious spirit, whose mantra was "Let's do our own thing, let's make out own work". I was always more reserved, so I was never asked to join the Ao no Kai.

However, even Iwanami hasn't made many documentaries; documentaries, that is, in the true sense of the word. They've made plenty of PR films, though. When making a documentary, the filmmaker's independence—his or her ability to do what he or she wants—is important, but a filmmaker can't just say "I want to make this", and then go off and make it. The company says to the film company, "We want you to make this", then Iwanami says "OK, we'll give this to Mr. So-and-so to do". That's how films are made. In the end, I started to make the films I wanted to make only after I became a freelancer. Out of the films I made at Iwanami, the one I can say I wanted to make was a short (43 min.) production called *Usuzumi no Sakura* (*The Cherry Tree with Grey Blossoms*/1977). This was completely my work, one that didn't cost much.

I'm very fortunate that my husband (Kudo Mitsuru) is a film producer. Of course, the company is so small that his desk is just about all there is to it, but he still helps me produce my work.

Also, his connections with developers and studios and the like help me in my work as well. Among the works I've made since I became a freelancer, there is *Hayachine no fu* (*Ode to Mt. Hayachine*/1982). This film, filmed in the mountains of Japan's Iwate Prefecture, shows the lifestyle of the people who live there, as well as the traditional *kagura* (sacred Shinto dance) that is still performed there. This film runs about 185 minutes. Then, there's *AKIKO — aru dansaa no shozo* — (*AKIKO — A Portrait of a Dancer* — /1985), a documentary about a modern dancer. *Chihosei rojin no sekai* (*How to Care for the Senile*/1986) and *Anshin shite oiru tame ni* (*Getting Old With a Sense of Security*/1990) are two works which focus of the problems of Japan's elderly population. When I was working on *Hayachine no fu*, the people of the village gave their full cooperation, and even helped us raise money for the production. Of course, we put out most of the money ourselves, but they helped us as well. The same with *AKIKO* — Akiko



AKIKO (Japan, 1985)

Kanda herself helped cover the filming expenses to a certain extent. *Chihosei rojin no sekai* was an independent production done under Iwanami Productions, who hired me as director. While working on *Anshin shite oiru tame ni*, I ran out of money, but fortunately there was someone to help me who loaned me the money I needed. Of course, I'm going to pay that person back as soon as the film gets out. Even though I never have any money, whenever I decide to start a project, I always holler and scream and raise a fuss, and someone will come out and help me... That's the feeling I've always had, and still have.

In Japan, industries have plenty of money, but no one puts much out for documentaries. This means that all of the people doing documentaries are working under the same conditions. In the first place, there's no money allocated for cultural activities or anything like that. The Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs percentage of the

national budget amounts to a mere 0.06%. I hear in France, it's 0.6% — which means that Japan's allocation is $1/10$ that of France's. That means that as a nation, we don't put much out for film. Recently, the "Japan Arts Fund" has been created. But the money from that fund is being spread out all over the place — for operas, for this, for that, and so on... They give financial assistance to filmmakers as well, but usually around ¥25 million (app. US\$200,000), when productions can go over ¥100 million (US\$800,000). And that's only for those works which have passed their paperwork gauntlet, you realize. Getting approval for funds to be released for a film is all well and good, but the money isn't given out before a film is made; it's given out only after a film is completed and has been released. But if there's anything that can be said to cause problems from the beginning when attempting to make a film, it's lack of funds. While working on my current project, I received financial assistance from the Japan Arts Fund. To make that film (*Kabukiyakusha Kataoka Nizaemon*), we worked hard at collecting funds for four years while we filmed. Finally, last year, we applied, and received ¥25 million. There are some documentaries you could make and get by with only ¥50-70 million, but with production costs and all, you really need closer to ¥100 million or you just won't make it. It would probably help quite a bit if you could receive that ¥25 million right at the start, but it doesn't work that way. Kind of funny, isn't it?

It would have been nice if during the Occupation, the Americans had made some kind of system to keep promoting cultural activities. Japanese aren't too good at making a system like that. We still haven't made one. Back then, we probably didn't think we'd become as rich as we are now. But, for whatever reasons, we have become rich. It would be nice if the wealthier corporations would use their wealth to support cultural activities, but their attitude is "If we put out this money, what will the benefit be for us and our company?" That's the value system that's at the base of their decisions whether to give out money or not. It's pointless even to try and say something like, "If your company uses that money to support these [cultural activities], it will improve your company's image". Of course, there are companies and foundations which are established and assist cultural works. Even so, those foundations want to know — in detail — where their money's going, how it's being used, what you're going to do with it, and if you don't play by their rules, you don't

get any money.

I'd like to mention that while at first glance it seems like a good idea for there to be national support of cultural activities, there is also the fear that in some cases the nation's simple involvement might place restrictions on artists' freedom. You could say that just because there is no money from the national budget involved that Japanese documentarists have freedom of action. That's because they work where there's nothing.

I really feel that there aren't many Japanese documentarists who can say that they've been able to make the documentaries they really wanted to make. That's because, except for the feature film industry, corporations are able to order films to fit their specifications. That's why in Japan, documentarists like Tsuchimoto and Ogawa are very rare. Even so, they and people like them aren't able to make a living just off of movies. Because they have trouble supporting themselves, their wives work, their assistants campaign for funds... Among documentarists, there isn't one person who can feed himself from documentaries alone. We're all very poor. That's why in this wealthy modern Japan, there isn't anyone out there saying "I want to become a documentary filmmaker". The only thing they see is that they won't be able to make it "big". This is a job that you have to love doing, or you won't be able to do it.

I've just finished *Kabukiyakusha Kataoka Nizaemon* (*Kabuki Actor Nizaemon Kataoka*). Even though Nizaemon is now 88 years old, and has great difficulty seeing, he is still performing. I filmed Nizaemon for four years. The work ended up being over eight hours long. There are lots of works about kabuki. I imagined making a film of about, oh, two hours or so, but I wasn't able to show his true ability, his magic, in that short time. That's why it turned into an eight-hour film: I wanted to leave a record, I wanted to make an image that would show the world that "Here, here is a truly magnificent person!"

After this, I think I like to do a work on some Japanese picture scrolls, ones that are about 300 years old. I've done a little filming of some picture scrolls this year, but I'm still working... As far as Japanese picture scrolls go, even 300 years old is pretty new. The majority of the picture scrolls that are regarded as National Treasures are about 700 years or so old. Even though the ones I'm filming haven't been designated National Treasures yet, they are still important cultural relics. Picture

scrolls are something rare and unusual not only in Japanese art, but in world art as well... I like to think they're like ancient movies.



Ms. Haneda Sumiko

Selected Filmography

Haneda Sumiko was born in 1925, and joined Iwanami Productions in 1950. She made her debut as a director in 1957 with *Mura no fujin gakkyu* (*Village Women's Classroom*). She later became a freelance director.

In 1977, her independently produced *Usuzumi no sakura* (*The Cherry Tree with Grey Blossoms*), which was a year-round record of the thousand-year old cherry tress on the upper banks of the Negishi River in Gifu Prefecture, drew critical acclaim. Some of her major works include *Hayachine no fu* (*Ode to Mt. Hayachine*), *AKIKO—aru dansaa no shozo* (*AKIKO—A Portrait of a Dancer—*), and *Chihosei rojin no sekai* (*How to Care for the Senile*).

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