

festival review

Poetics of Chance: Soda Kazuhiro's Retrospective at RIDM 2018

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In his article “The Postwar Documentary Trace: Groping in the Dark,” Abé Mark Nornes provocatively asks “What happened to the exhilaration and passionate engagement of the Japanese documentary world of the 1960s?” (Nornes 2002, 41). Far from being a groundless provocation, it was based on the debates between different generations of Japanese documentarists at the 1998 Yamagata International Documentary Festival. The generations’ different approaches to documentary were addressed in the festival’s symposium “The Groping in the Dark: Japanese Documentary in the 1980s and Beyond” (39). At the symposium Kanai Katsu and Iizuka Toshio, representing the older generation formed in the militant documentary scene of the 1960s, complained about the lack of social awareness and commitment in the filmmaking practices of the younger generation, criticised for their focus on private introspection and the predilection to investigate intimate histories, often in an autobiographical registers. Ise Shin’ichi and Kawase Naomi, speaking for the new generation, affirmed that, while their films were not directly involved in any public debate and they rejected the militant aesthetic of 1960s, they nonetheless engaged critically with central issues in Japanese society, but from an oblique, intimate and personal point of view.

Exactly twenty years from the Yamagata symposium, the 2018 edition of the Rencontres

internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) hosted the retrospective of the films of independent filmmaker Soda Kazuhiro, whose body of works merges the two seemingly opposite conceptions of documentary which clashed at the Japanese festival two decades before. Indeed, Soda’s working method, theorised in his “Ten Commandments of Observational Filmmaking” (Soda 2018), is based on a particularly strict conception of observational documentary. While having as a starting point the private circle of his acquaintances (his ex-university friends, his parents-in-law, his neighbours), his films reveal issues which show the current crisis of fundamental aspects of Japanese contemporary life (the electoral process and the state of democracy, the welfare state and the lack of care for the weakest members of society, the crisis of the labour market due to the ageing of the population). I would call the aesthetics produced a “poetic of chance” based on observations stemming from chance encounters that open up unexpected vistas into the current state of Japan.

The 10 Commandments of Observation

The observational mode of documentary was not simply a choice for Soda, but also a necessity. As he explains on his personal website and repeated many times in the Q&As after the screenings of his films at RIDM, his formation

as a filmmaker happened within the strictures of television formats that required extensive research and a clear editorial stance way before the start of shooting. This, according to Soda, prevented him to begin filming without preconceptions and expectations, which ultimately did not allow the subjects to express themselves fully and did not allow the filmmaker to come across surprise events. As he put it, “I found that these practices prevented me from making documentaries with eye-opening discoveries for both the audience and myself. So I decided to do the opposite” (Soda 2018).

Starting from his first film, *Campaign* (*Senkyo*, 2007, 120 mins), Soda developed his own personal method to produce films that he calls ‘observational’ (indeed, in the credit sequence of all his documentaries, the inscription “Observational Film #...” appears). His conceptualization of observation is double: it involves both the observational capability of the director and the active gaze of the spectator watching the film. As Soda explains: “Firstly, I as a filmmaker closely observe the reality in front of me and make films according to my observations and discoveries, not based on my assumptions or preconceptions I had before I shot the film. Secondly, I encourage viewers to observe the film actively with their own eyes and minds” (Soda 2018). This mode of filmmaking, though, requires a degree of discipline equal to that required for shooting content for television, yet the rules are opposite. Soda’s rules are “The Ten Commandments of Observational Filmmaking”:

1. No research.
2. No meetings with subjects.
3. No scripts.
4. Roll the camera yourself.
5. Shoot for as long as possible.
6. Cover small areas deeply.
7. Do not set up a theme or goal before editing.
8. No narration, super-imposed titles, or music.
9. Use long takes.
10. Pay for the production yourself. (Soda 2018).

Commandments one through nine consist of what I called Soda’s “poetic of chance.” The subjects and the topics for his documentaries are discovered by chance encounters with people that

spark his interest. Not having a film crew always at the ready and being constantly alone with his subjects, (with the exception of his wife Kashiwagi Kyoko, who also produces the majority of his films), creates the intimacy seen in the films. This allows for a wide variety of long-takes to be taken, in which various themes, both personal to Soda’s subjects and relating to the wider social background, are allowed to unfold. Indeed, his films are based on a constant dialogue between the intimate stories of individuals and their context within the broader landscape of Japanese society. Issues which seem to be specific of a certain locality are actually a reflection of national, and sometimes global, problematics.

The distribution process is fundamental because it is the director’s only source of income, in accordance to the last of his “Ten Commandments.” Once Soda assesses that he shot enough material, he proceeds to a long and solitary process of editing, which usually takes several months. When the film is ready, he then shows it in various film festivals and in a chain of independent film theatres throughout Japan. Afterwards, his films become available on his Vimeo page both for rent or ownership, and there are special prices if universities or other institutions decide to acquire them. Indeed, the main reasons why he is able to make films according to his previous commandments is economic independence, which is afforded through a mixture of very low production costs coupled with a stable network of distribution to rely on. The last commandment, therefore, is crucial to sustain his personal mode of observational filmmaking, and economic independence is also one of the main themes of his films.

Of Politics, Money, and Art

Money and its influence on local election campaigns is one of the main themes of Soda’s Observational Film #1, *Campaign* (*Senkyo*, 2007, 120 mins). In it, Yamauchi Kazuhiko, an old university friend of Soda, is picked by the powerful Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of then (2005) Prime Minister, Koizumi Junichiro, to run in a special election in the city of Kawasaki. Yamauchi, who was not a member of the party before, was mainly picked so that the LDP would not lose its majority in the Kawasaki city council. Soda’s camera shows us how Yamauchi is made to stand for hours at

street corners greeting people with party slogans and awkward handshakes, how he is humiliated by other, more experienced party members who have no interest for his ideas, and how he receives almost no economic support to run his campaign. The result is a bleak vision of the democratic process, reduced to empty slogans, party manoeuvrings to maintain economic privileges, and the personal humiliation of the candidate.

But this is not the end of Yamauchi's story. Indeed Soda's old friend decides to run again for the city council of Kawasaki, this time as an independent. Greatly upset by the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, Yamauchi decides to run on a platform focused on raising awareness about the dangers of nuclear energy and with a clear abolitionist message. Soda decided to film this second campaign, and the result is Observational Film #5, *Campaign 2* (*Senkyo 2*, 2013, 149 mins). Many scenes mirror those in *Campaign 1*: more slogans shouted from the corner of the street, more handshakes, more obnoxious LDP party members (now his rivals). Yet, Yamauchi's actions are no longer mechanical repetitions of party's instructions, but the passionate and urgent message of a man worried by the possibility of a new nuclear disaster. A scene in particular testifies of this change. At the end of the film, Soda fixes the camera on a close-up of Yamauchi making a speech near a metro station, and then slowly zooms out to reveal the indifference of his audience, who simply passes him by, and the aloneness of Yamauchi's endeavour. This scene replicates one in the beginning of *Campaign 1*, but rather than appearing as a pathetic figure caught in an awkward position, Yamauchi appears in the second film as a tragic hero. He is a sort of Japanese Cassandra warning his people of future dangers, but destined to remain unheard.

His two films concerning internationally renowned playwright Hirata Oriza and his company Seinenda, Observational Film #3, *Theatre 1* (*Engeki 1*, 2012, 172 mins) and Observational Film #4, *Theatre 2* (*Engeki 2*, 2012, 170 mins), address questions of economic sustainability and artistic independence. Soda explores how theatre works as an artistic practice and how it can be sustained as an economically independent endeavour. Hirata's productions are characterized by the actors' painstaking and extremely precise performance, while multiple simultaneous events happen on stage. While the resulting sense of realism was

unprecedented in Japanese theatre, Hirata's plays required long periods of preparation and the reliance on a stable company of players. While the first film investigates this meticulous artistic process, the second film focuses on the economic viability of Hirata's method. Soda documents Hirata as he gives theatre courses, writes books and public grants, and gives public lectures, all to economically sustain his work, which is less and less funded publicly and relies more and more on the so-called free market and private patronage. Hirata, just like Yamauchi in *Campaign 1* and *Campaign 2*, becomes a heroic figure facing increasingly difficult mundane task to preserve his artistic independence and the livelihood of the members of his company.

Of Care, Labour, and Cats

Both Yamauchi and Hirata endure many trials not only to foster their beliefs, but to care for the people they love and work with. And care is the main theme of other two of Soda's films, Observational Film #2, *Mental* (*Seishin*, 2008, 135 mins), and Observational Film Extra, *Peace* (2010, 75 mins).

Mental observes the goings on at a small clinic for people with mental disabilities called Chorale, in Okayama City, run by the old but resilient Dr. Yamamoto Masatomo. Despite being close to his eightieth birthday, Yamamoto-san works tirelessly for his patients, stigmatized by Japanese society's harsh views on mental illness. Soda follows and portrays both the patients and the medical staff, their daily routines, their constant dealings with inefficient bureaucracy, their therapy sessions, and their intimate stories. The picture that results is of a place of care and solidarity, where the weakest members of Japanese society can safely deal with their issues and receive the medical attention they need. The film also reveals the precarious foundation on which this clinic stands. As a not-for-profit, the clinic relies on public grants and projects, which are less and less available. Nevertheless, the clinic continues through Dr. Yamamoto's stubborn determination to work despite his age, because it has become difficult to find someone who will take his place. In spite of the difficulties, Chorale in Okayama City keeps working.

Peace concerns another charitable organisation, which provides services such as transportation and house care for the disabled and the elderly.

It is run by Soda's parents-in-law, Kashiwagi Toshio and Hiroko. The Kashiwagis' organisation faces the same difficulties as *Chorale*: the lack of funding, the ageing of the personnel, the daily difficulties of dealing with people who cannot take care of themselves any longer. And yet, moments of peace and connection can still be found. In this film, Soda focuses on two particular subplots. The first involves his mother-in-law, Hiroko, and her relationship with 91-year-old Hashimoto Shiro, who is in the final stages of lung cancer. The conversations between the two alleviate the solitude of Hashimoto-san, who reflects on his life and the traumatic, horrific events he witnessed during World War II. The second subplot deals with the community of cats cared for by Soda's father-in-law, Toshio. The stray cats stay for a few years at the Kashiwagis' house and then disappear. Every time a new cat shows up, it must adapt to the rhythms of the community, otherwise it will be driven away. Soda films the process of a new cat adapting to the already formed community, following the early tensions when the cat society seems threatened, then the older cats' slow acceptance and acclimation of the new cat, and finally the return to their communal living.

A similar storyline, new elements entering an older community, is present in *Oyster Factory* (*Kaki Kouba*, 2015, 145 mins). Here, due to the rapid decline of the local population, a shortage of labour threatens the fishing community of Ushimado. Long scenes of the labouring seamen, of the surrounding community, and the fish and oysters, are intertwined with the daily life of a fishing family who is also looking for seasonal labourers needed for the complex work of oyster farming. Since few workers are available now in Ushimado, the family decides to hire migrant Chinese labourers to work on the ship and at the factory for several months. Chinese labourers already work in other local industries, and the two communities, Japanese and Chinese, although very different and mostly unable to speak each other's languages, find a way to live together through constant negotiations and daily acts of kindness and solidarity. These acts are necessary to face, on the one hand, the precarity of temporary migrant labour, and on the other, the slow but steady decline of the local population. And yet, the oyster factory is still working.

Aruitemo... Aruitemo...

Chance should be paired with another concept to faithfully describe Soda's poetics: resilience. This theme underlies the most beautiful and elegiac of Soda's documentaries, *Observational Film #7, Inland Sea (Minatomachi)*, 2018, 122 mins). In stunning black-and-white cinematography, Soda follows the life of three elderly dwellers in the town of Ushimado: Wei-chan, an eighty-six-year-old fisherman who every day still earns his daily bread on the sea; Kumi-san, an eighty-four-year-old woman who wanders the village and engages whomever she finds in lively conversations; and Koso-san who, after the death of her husband, still runs the family fishery despite being a self-defined "late stage elderly." They all live in a town which, as previously seen in *Oyster Factory*, has been particularly hit economically by the decline of the population and by the migration of younger generations to larger cities, such as Tokyo and Kyoto. And yet, they survive the best they can, despite enormous difficulties and the approach of death. They, like Yamauchi and his campaigns, like Hirata and his theatre company, like Dr. Yamamoto and his clinic for mental patients, like the Kashiwagis and their care-giving organisation, like the family of fishermen in Ushimado, all of them keep on going while the world they inhabit is slowly but steadily declining.

Just as Kumi-san, they all keep walking, *aruitemo... aruitemo...*

References

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