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Showing Is Not Enough

An Interview with Tsuchimoto Noriaki

Aaron Gerow and Yasui Yoshio, 1995



Minamata - The Victims and Their World (1971)

Aaron Gerow: *Looking at your academic background, it seems you had no relationship with film. It was only after you had spent years as a student political activist that you entered the film world. I was wondering why you then decided on cinema. The first films you made at Iwanami Productions were, after all, sponsored films.*

Tsuchimoto Noriaki: Lately I've been watching too many of those "50th anniversary of the end of the war" programs and I think because of their influence this may wind up being my "50 year history"...

Thinking back on it, I was very poor before and during the war. Because my father was a minor official, you could probably say we led a frugal life. Since there were no children's books in the house, of course we didn't have a record player either. All we had was a radio so we could hear the weather reports concerning incoming typhoons. That was the type of environment it was. Most of my elementary school days were spent in Koji-machi (Tokyo's Chiyoda-ward) and the school I went to was made up mainly of kids from the upper middle class. There were kids who came from out the district to get there and I guess you could say it was a famous school.

When I'd go to my friends' house they'd have record players, cameras, books, everything. In the midst of that, there was the lure of a stylish Tokyo and foreign culture.

In my school district, there were the grand mansions of the Mitsui and Iwasaki conglomerates. Across the moat in the back was a famous Japanese style painter, next to him was the Swiss Embassy, on the top of that hill was the house of an opera star - I guess you'd call it a first class area of Tokyo. In a corner of it, there was a place like a little valley and in that place there was a group of houses and tenements for the less "well off." This was where people like performers, street car operators, and hotel workers all lived, the real heart of the old town area, but it was a very relaxed area because everyone there was poor.

My grandmother had a terrible illness that used up a lot of money - she had spinal caries. It wasn't only a child's mindset, but I could stand it. More than anything, if she heard there was a good doctor

somewhere, she'd go to him, or if there was a faith healer, she'd go to him, and all of my father's money would go to her doctor's bills. You must remember this was still when there was no such thing as medicare or welfare.

Surrounding that world of the old town where you didn't have to worry about being poor, all the kids were rich kids brought up in Yamanote. And I was a transfer student from Nagoya mixed in with them and never really felt like I fit in. But when it came to studying, we all jockeyed for the top and I wasn't going to lay down either. But culturally speaking, I was raised in a seedy looking world. [laughs] I guess because of that, I was able to really get along with those friends I lived with after the war when we were really poor. It wasn't really a problem of class, it's just that we understood each other quickly and easily whatever the conversation. The first world I saw was that type of world.

Yes, in my generation everywhere worshipped the emperor; we had an imperialist education knocked into our very marrow, and we never even knew of the existence of the culture and thought in Taishō and early Shōwa that criticized all that. When the war ended, I was 17.

The biggest thing to me was finding out that the emperor was just a regular human being.

Even now I hate the emperor system, but I have a different memory of this. My elementary school was in Tokyo and not far from the Imperial Palace. And as you can imagine, the three closest elementary schools were made to come out and participate in ceremonies at the palace. We were the emperor's "official" elementary school. [laughs] If a foreign dignitary would come to Japan, we'd be marched out in front of everyone wearing smart uniforms and waving the national flag of Japan. Cameras and newsreels all came to capture it. We happily waved our flags until we thought they would break. Whenever there was an imperial visit, we were all brought out and bowed deeply. They'd tell us: "Don't raise your head until they've passed. If you look upon the emperor you'll go blind. Remember he is a god." When we asked adults how the emperor and empress had successors to their line if they didn't indulge in sexual intercourse, they,

speechlessly, would avoid giving a direct answer. We used to play around the Palace or in the big moat. Whenever we passed the gate, we had to bow. Because the emperor was god, a being you were never to look upon.

However, one day there was a photo published in the newspaper of the emperor and MacArthur standing side by side... a tall MacArthur and the short emperor. When I saw this I was so embarrassed I could have died. I mean, we had stopped emperor worship after we lost the war, but who had deceived us? Wasn't it education, newspapers, school teachers, the citizens groups, and even my own parents who were to blame? I really felt that they had a lot of gall to gang up and push that divine emperor system on us.

That's why I felt like I should never trust an adult, be suckered into fashions and fads, read best sellers, that I should take passionate debates with a grain of salt. I made a decision in my heart about several such things. At any rate, I would only trust those of my generation, those with whom I saw eye to eye, all the while keeping a scrutinizing watch on those adults with whom I had to have contact. I'm ashamed of it now, but in my late teens, I was a pretentious little brat.

I had an interest in politics but I only knew the early Marx, and all I really knew of Lenin and Mao was what I read in pamphlets. But I did enter the student movement. I paid my tuition with a part time job, but I was starving for books. I sold my blood, and once stole a book. I still remember the title, it was the third volume of Marx's *German Ideology*. [laughs] The lady in charge of the store saw me, but I think she let it go. You know, even to this day I still won't show my face in that store. [laughs]

Right around the Korean War, I was really involved in protests against raising student tuition and the red purge of all progressive professors.

Did you have any problems finding a job after being involved in the student movement?

I really didn't have a hope then. Through the Occupation army, the order went out to give lists of names of the main members of groups that were perceived

to be left wing. The regulations on groups stated that if you gave out such a list of the main members, you were allowed to perform certain activities. That was around 1949 when that was issued, I believe. Even Zengakuren (the all-student union) was required. But the names of the real valuable activists were hidden, and the names of members who were expendable were entered on the list. I was one of the ones who was expendable. [laughs]

I wasn't a leader or a theorist. I was one of the official publishers of the Zengakuren newspaper, but that meant cutting the mimeographed copy, and folding and sending out the printed bulletins. I didn't mind doing that kind of work, because I had no delusions of becoming an ideologue.

Consequently, at this time, I was on the Japanese public safety bureau's black list and thought I couldn't get a decent job. I had been expelled from college, so I felt you could call it a natural course of events. There was really no way to get around having two black marks: the list and being expelled.

However, there was an armistice in the Korean War, the special procurement boom was over, and even those who had gone to college and seriously graduated were finding a hard time getting employed. It was a time when you had to do something, anything, to get by. Actually, I wanted to become a journalist if I could. That was because I really admired John Reed who wrote *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

I didn't have the desire to enter the film world, at least then. Even though I liked films, I had never even touched a camera and I didn't really have the time or money to go to movies. That was mainly because I lived in culturally deprived conditions. [laughs]

I heard you mention before that you lived near the Toho studios.

At the end of the war I moved to Kinuta in Setagaya Ward, right next to the Toho studios. We barged in on one of my relatives' place, and lived there after the war as well, but that area just happened to be a sort of film village. The neighbourhood was filled with famous film people. Miyajima Yoshio the cameraman, art directors, actors, actresses, people in production,

and the list went on. And I lived one door down from the kindly old man Yoshino Seiji who was later responsible for my entering Iwanami Productions. I'm skipping ahead somewhat, but I was to enter films some ten years after that.

Even though Mr Yoshino was originally a feature film cinematographer, he was the one who chose to make a photography section in the Culture Film division at Toho studios. During the war, he shot *Yuki no kessho* [*Snow Flake*], *Shimo no hana* [*Flowers of Frost*], and *Horyuji*, all of which are recognized as classics. He was nice to me from the time I was a middle school student. In the last days of the war, when the air raid warnings would come out, men would have got out to stand watch. Now, standing watch is really a boring thing. Sometimes while watching the night sky, the normally tight-lipped Yoshino would mutter as if talking to himself about the particular techniques he used in the films he was shooting at that time. He used to tell me things like, "If you attach a time-lapse camera to a microscope, several hours worth of the movement of frost become several seconds," or, "To shoot Horyuji's pagoda, you have to build a scaffold" – things which used to send me reeling. [laughs] But he never asked me if I wanted to make films. [laughs] But he knew the conditions that surrounded me. That's what was strange. [laughs]

After I was expelled from college, when the Communist Party was in a period of extreme left adventurism, there was a time I held up in the mountains and carried on like a guerrilla soldier. We said it was to protest the American Occupation Army's bases and to destroy the owners of forests and the like. That is, it was the place to temper the young, a place where factional cells were eliminated. Knowing that, I still went out, and got arrested by the cops in a petty skirmish, and get prosecuted. It took three years before the first trial ended (1955). I got released on bail, but you still have to appear in court from time to time. And in your average company, you can't just go say, "I need some time off to go to court." [laughs] Luckily, at that time, one of my friends from the Japan-China Friendship Society's main office told me about a job in the advertising department of their bulletin. I worked there three years working on the bulletin and doing things like introductory screenings of new Chinese films. I think my assigned work suited me, but since

I didn't have much interest in continuing with the Japan-China friendship movement, and since I thought my sentencing would turn out to be a pivotal point for me, I couldn't wait for 1955. After 1955 the curtain opened on the new era of high growth. And then Yoshino told me he wanted to "have a talk."

I wondered, "Was it about me?" but it wasn't that. [laughs]

I was told, "You probably have some friends good enough for this, introduce me to them." I recommended one. That friend of mine was a hard worker. Then the verdict for me came in, and I was found guilty but my sentence was suspended. My time would no longer be taken up in court. And at the right time I was asked, "Do you want to work?"

But my heart wasn't really in it. Living in a film village and the things I saw there really stuck with me. I participated in the great Toho strike, I even went to the studios, but by then, the independent production movement had already begun. That overlapped with when I was in the student movement. By the time Yoshino asked me, the real glory days were already over and the freelance assistant directors all complained, "It's the disposable age." That sense of disillusionment changed the way I looked at things. Though it sounds pretentious, I felt as though I had seen both sides of stars and film people... Movies aren't really that big a deal anyways.

Was that against fiction films?

They were interesting enough in themselves, in terms of those who watch fiction films. But in terms of making such films, I really didn't have much interest. However, one day I was invited to a screening of Hani Susumu's *Kyōshitsu no kodomotachi: gakushū shidō e no michi* [*Children of the Classroom*] by Oguma (Hitoshi), whom I had introduced to Iwanami a year before. I was really impressed by this film: it had originality with a fresh kind of direction that broke the formulas. I was also very interested in how they managed to create a sense of almost verbal expression with the camera. This was my first real meeting with documentary.

Was that interest related to your earlier desire to be a journalist?

Yes, it was close. For me the film grammar and camerawork were the most interesting. I think it was probably the first (1950s) Iwanami documentary to use a single lens reflex Arriflex. Unlike the Mitchell camera, for which up until then you had to peer through the finder, the cameraman could adjust the focus as he followed an object with the camera. Until that time, on all shoots I had seen, the assistant cameraman had to use a tape measure to correctly measure the focal distance. Because I'd seen them repeatedly say, "Start on that mark," and then run numerous takes to see how it looked, the new lens probably looked extremely fresh. While he was shooting, the cameraman, I think it was Omura Shizuo, really thought it was good: called it the "thinking camera," I think. Of course automatic focus is taken for granted by people today, but you could look hard through that camera and quickly correct slight focus problems in the lens or adjust while panning. The subjects are children and the camerawork is really alive. I was especially surprised with Hani Susumu's youthfulness. That was about that time when I said, "I want to run the camera," and Yoshino said, "Remember your age" - in other words, it was too late. [laughs] By then I was already 28. In the end, I was made a producer's apprentice, starting as a location manager. I was busy getting lunches and securing hotel arrangements on a PR film for a big steel company, and didn't get to participate in filming often.

But I was able to meet very skilled cinematographers and assistant directors there, and I was glad I was able to talk to them. If you compared my previous jobs to that job you could say it was extravagant. The sake I had previously only been able to drink maybe ten times a year, I could now end every day with. 365 days a year. [laughs]

Meeting Segawa Jun'ichi was the best though. During the war he was assistant on *Tatakau heitai* [*Fighting Soldiers*] and when he'd drink we'd debate about Kamei Fumio or Miki Shigeru's camerawork. When we settled down, I'd pester him noisily asking, "What were you trying for with today's camerawork?" I was really drunk at the time. I got the feeling then that

while his work was an industrial PR film, his shots were purely a cinematographer's.

So you ended up learning more from a cameraman than the directors?

Yes. On my first job he was both cinematographer and on-site director and a famous supervising editor named Ise Chonosuke edited it all. I think it was the tradition of prewar/wartime documentary but they'd say, "You shoot the scenes and I'll put it together," and divide the work into photography and supervisory editing. The cameraman would be handed something like a shooting script, make a plan, and go shoot it. Afterwards Ise, who had the tendency to not even go on location, put it together. This was also taken on by so-called external contractors for Iwanami Productions. I learned technique as Ise's assistant but, although this may be impolite, as far as documentary film making goes, he was the ring-leader that left behind a bad film style. It's hard for me to come right out and say it to the degree he was a genius of an editor, but he would follow a certain goal and adapt the montage to fit that. I guess you could say that was the legacy of P.C.L. (the forerunner of Toho) culture films.

Yasui: Didn't Segawa get mad when the shots he took were edited?

They were both professionals: they had the spirit where Segawa would say, "You can't take that cut out!" and Ise, "Don't overlook that shot." Since they made masterworks even for only PR films, it was frightening. I really had an extravagant experience during my PR film days, technically speaking.

Gerow: So Segawa was kind of your teacher at Iwanami. But afterwards, he was also your cameraman. What was your relationship like then?

This may not answer that directly but let me try. Very recently I went to visit Mr Segawa, who is sick in bed, and was able to talk with him about what the most important thing in documentaries was. He told me an episode I had heard a dozen of times about the making of *Fighting Soldiers*. Maybe this was something he had been wondering about over and over again for 50 years.

Specifically it was like this. There was an event that happened during the filming of *Fighting Soldiers* regarding a scene they didn't film, so of course it isn't in the film. It is something that Segawa will never forget.

His story is this. After the Japanese army had made many people suffer passing through a village that they had burnt to the ground, Kamei happened to spot a child in a field, got a hold on him and put his arms around them, and then called his cameraman saying, "Miki, shoot this!" Segawa was an assistant so he was always by the side of the camera ready to crank it. But Mr Miki didn't try to shoot it. He said for a reason, "But Kamei, your hand's in the shot." Kamei replied, "It's OK if my hand's in, take it!" According to Segawa, Miki was a "famous" coward, but he stiffened up and refused to take it.

That night Kamei couldn't suppress his anger at Miki and the two argued on without end. Kamei put Miki down verbally, but even so Miki wasn't convinced. Kamei said, "If I edit it, I can show the terror of war in that child's expression. I could have used that kid's face. So all you had to do was shoot what I said you should."

Miki didn't give in: "I can't shoot that." He said, "It's not in me." This debate stuck with Segawa for the rest of his life and lies at the base of his philosophy of being a cinematographer.

Until he was in his forties he thought, "He should have taken it as Kamei told him to. You take what the director tells you to and then decide about it at the rushes." But in later life you could say that he began to understand what Miki thought in his illogical refusal. He said, "There are things that a cameraman just cannot take, even though he is told to. And now I think that it was Miki who was right."

Further, recently there are parts of Segawa's memories that have come back clearly. For example when he was drafted into the service, he accidentally met at the front a film director and a cameraman he used to work with. Adding that, "They are all gone now so I can tell you," he said he was told they once purposely let a Chinese soldier escape and then shot him with a machine gun for a scene. They said, "When you fire

a machine gun it's not easy to get a direct hit. We can't have an enemy soldier flailing around." Segawa was terrified to hear that one of his seniors actually killed a Chinese prisoner of war for the sake of a film. And even talk about it as if it were nothing! He thought, "This is what it means to be a filmmaker. How terrifying, how shameful," and said he tried to forget it. And Segawa had nearly forgotten it until Miki's illogical logic pushed its way through to the front and brought his memory back clearly. That was the first time I ever heard this.

After a two or three year tour of duty, that's when Segawa linked up with Miki and shot *Fighting Soldiers*. "Looking back on Kamei and Miki's debate, Miki's argument fundamentally held the position that we were victimizers, invaders." In other words, according to what Segawa said, "All the members of the documentary film squad wore military uniforms, or were made to wear clothes resembling such, and the camera lens glistened, looking like a weapon or a rifle. And before you set that onto a tripod, anyone who sees you carrying it around in your arms is going to be scared. To that Chinese kid, we looked just like Japanese soldiers. His was a face that thought we were going to kill him."

For Miki, photographing the victims was something he could not do from the side of the victimizers. At that time, whether or not Kamei had any sense of being an aggressor or not is not clear – perhaps it was subconscious – but there was an element of discrimination in his direction of this film. The two memories converge to make a terrible circle.

In other words, I guess I want to say, "As a cameraman there's a part of your body that just cannot film some things." I imagine it was Segawa's testament of over 60 years of being a cinematographer.

I don't know about the feature film world, but in Segawa's youth there were those who thought the director was an "emperor," and that the director's suggestions were the same as a command. But the fact that "the body doesn't listen to what it's being told" suggests a deep, intelligent nature. An intelligence that has sunk to the depths of one's body.

Once a cameraman has taken a shot, he can't complain about how it is used, because he is the one who took it. What Segawa wanted to say to those who follow him is the actuality and spirit of the statement that a cameraman is not simply the one holding the camera. After fifty years of thinking through Kamei and Miki's debate, he found his own answer. Pulling out the memory of what a companion had whispered to him on the battlefield, he paid his formal respects to Miki and at the same time skewered the "Kamei Myth" regarding him being an anti-war filmmaker. That's the feeling I got when I received Segawa's theory of being a cameraman. I was struck with awe.

Does your staff maintain that kind of spirit? Would it be OK if your cameraman said, "I can't film that?"

Maybe, well I think it'd be alright. Cameramen who hold feelings like, "This is my film, this is my shot, this is my work," on such an internal level have pride. I learned from Segawa about cameramen with a sense of what kind shot is acceptable like, "The shot I took can stand on its own. If you don't like it, I won't take it." So I would like to have cameramen like that on my crew.

At the time at Iwanami, there was the Ao no Kai [Blue Group, also called Blue Society], so did you have such discussion about documentary there? Amidst a situation where PR films were the center of documentary production, did you argue about that?

I guess in the end you could call it the Ao no Kai era. Whether or not you can call it a "society" or not I'll leave until later.

It's probably just my own prejudice, but it seems that you can divide film people into two broad categories. Those who have a big spirited heart, are interested in everything, and more adept at acting than the actors. In the film world they make a fictional world and draw the staff and cast into it. Then there is the type common in the field of documentary film, those who are strong in film theory and logic, the polemicist. [laughs] I guess I entered a film company that was strong in theory. [laughs] The majority of young filmmakers at Iwanami wanted to know how to take mental, spiritual images. They craved them.

The locations where they shot PR films were electric or steel companies; thinking about it, there was no way to defend themselves. They knew that they were making films geared for the stockholders' meetings. However, in the midst of all that, there were those who wanted to their own individual shots that could only be done in images not in words. And through an accumulation of practice, there were those, myself included, who thought they would be able to make their own future film theory. Everyone's probably the same. But the reason it didn't become idealistic is because the style was to thoroughly debate the films that they all worked on. In other words, they didn't bring forward a new tendency in film theory or do director/film research. Namely, if there were good rushes taken, you'd dip into them. And you lean on sake for support, and drink to it. For failed shots that didn't turn out well, we'd listen if the people involved wanted to make an issue out of them, but nobody had an interest in poorly taken shots. Because the staff that took those cuts also recognized it. Rather, we'd wonder why even a regular shot sometimes has excellent kinetic power: how were they able to take that shot, what was happening between director and cameraman that allowed that to happen? We'd even want to ask about the unspoken level of camaraderie. That's why we could never do it without sake. [laughs] In order to open up one's painful areas you need to borrow the power of sake. At least I'm that way.

Even today, my disposition is to want to show the rushes I have taken to people and ask their opinion: "Well what do you think? It's probably no good right?" I understand it was the unspoken practice of old moviemakers to "keep the rushes off limits to anyone other than the staff or crew." External contract veterans had that character, but to us, a younger, horizontally equal generation, it was silly. The people of Ao no Kai thought it only natural to say, "so-and-so's rushes are ready!" and go to the screening room to watch. That's why when we found images with impact, we were all impressed and felt like, "Let's drink to this tonight!" But to drink, you need a place for it and we went to our favourite bar Narcisse and occupied it until it was almost bankrupt. [laughs]

Whether Ao no Kai was a "society" or not is still not very clear to me. There was no leader, no rules, and no

dues. Anyone could talk about anything they pleased. Films are made by a staff, so everyone on location, the producer, cameraman, soundman, editor, and the rest were all there.

At the time, we even showed up at a certain film studies group. And all the progressive directors from each documentary film company as well as critics were there. But everyone was overwhelmingly passionate about reviewing the films of Godard or Alain Resnais and that was not by strong point. I was mildly interested but not so much in that logic. They acted as intermediary for those who made films, as if you had to go through them – it made me irritated. Rather than introducing or theorizing about those directors or films beyond our reach, I thought it was infinitely more interesting to speak of, say, the work of the cameraman Suzuki Tatsuo, or the montage work of Kuroki Kazuo or Higashi Yōichi – people you worked with. I heard my full of things like Ogawa Shinsuke's unusual analysis of location work when he was an assistant director. I was entranced by Kuroki Kazuo's overturning his own previous ideas, saying, "That's it, that's it," as new images developed to such a complicated point we were frightened. Some of the regulars were cameramen like Ōtsu Kōshirō, Okumura Yūji, and Tamura Masaki, sound recorders like Kubota Yukio, editors like Kamoto Yuriyo. I guess those two or three years were a film school of various sorts to each of us.

Among the members of the Ao no Kai, there were many directors who left Iwanami to go independent. You yourself, after making such classic PR films as Aru kikan joshi [An Engineer's Assistant] (1963) and Dokyument rojo [On the Road – A Document] (1964), went on to independently film Ryugakusei Chua Sui Rin [Exchange Student Chua Swee-Lin] (1965). Was there a kind of reaction against PR films entering the era of independent production? Did you yourself feel you could finally produce films as a form of political action?

I already mentioned that from the end of the war until I got into films, I lived about 10 years doing things that were not related to film. I had nothing to do with university film study groups, or script research groups, or cinema clubs. But as a spectator I saw enough independent and politically oriented films

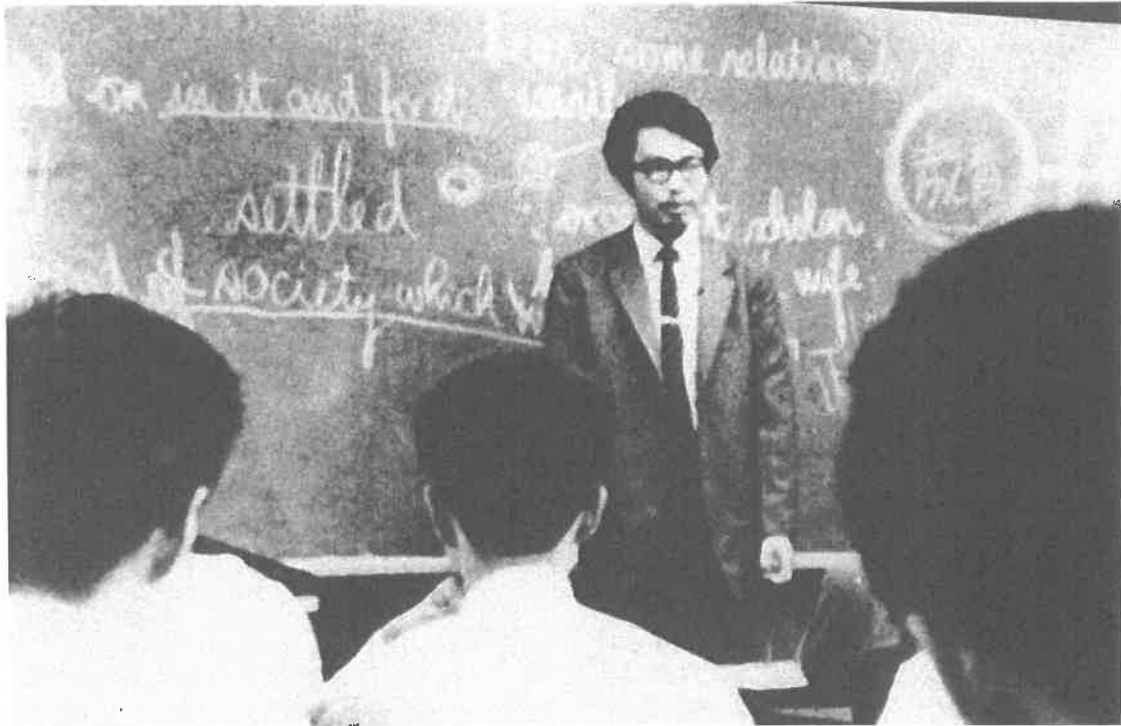
to make one's head spin. At one period after the war, I gorged myself on the sort of films that had a clear ideology, and a film grammar that expressed that explicitly, the type that said, "Let's band together and do it!" I gradually became less responsive to films reducible to such messages, but as for politics itself, I've always kept a political way of thinking. But I think that's different from film expression and enters the realm of sensitivity.

In the case of the film *Exchange Student Chua Swee-Lin*, the exchange student was just a regular Asian student in the title who wanted independence from the former English colony of Malaya. What drove him out of the university was the same old contempt for Asia held by the Japanese, and you cannot speak about that without bringing politics up. However, what was filmed that really impressed me was when Chua spoke. He had a charisma in expressing himself that seemed to envelop the camera.

I think too much sometimes, so for example, filming the meeting at Chiba University, I just assumed all on my own what they wanted to protest and expected that result to come out. When it didn't come out the way I expected, I'd think, "This hunch was wrong again," and pull entirely back and wait, shooting the area or everyone's backs and continuing my relations with them. I have a saying for my staff which goes, "It's interesting when predictions are being overturned." No matter when or what you say, since it's probably related to what you are wanting to say, I make that unfinished thought or whisper, the change of a small expression very important.

This is true of all my films, but when it becomes a film, the people filmed sometimes say, "Did I say this?" Something is expressed that doesn't come out in their daily life. In the everyday there is something you could call the non-everyday, something that's not a lie, not a fake. Film depends on the relationship between the camera staff and the object.

Yasui: *Moving from Chua Swee-Lin to Paruchizan zenshi [Prehistory of the Partisans] (1969), I was really impressed with Prehistory of the Partisans when I saw it at school. It really has a buildup. I thought you must be someone with a strong talent for organization. Where did that come from?*



Prehistory of the Partisans (1969)

Well, I think it's probably because I keep a distance between myself and the subject. I keep a distance while maintaining a great interest. Even if I have sympathy for the subject I can't allow an emotional impulse. In *Prehistory of the Partisans*, the characters are diligently fighting, but I look to see whether they can honestly carry out this armed conflict in the future.

There's the flow in the period from the students' sense of crisis to the taking up of arms, because this was right during the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The students' feeling of being bottled up actually existed and you could also see the violence of the opponents. That's why they (the Kyoto University Partisans (non-sectarian)) were so serious. At least I think so, but because I wonder where these people will go, I should both bring the focus forward and pull it back. For example, in the confusion of the scene where they barricade the university and openly arm themselves, I put in a bird's eye shot from Mt Hiei which made Kyoto University appear to be nothing more

than one corner of the old city. This was in part to keep my head cool as well. Nothing's changed in the world, and the tourists are ogling over the students' violence. Where will they go from here? I wanted to show that future space.

Gerow: *This is a question relating to style. The dual quality, as you said, both keeping a distance and having a great interest in the main subject – someone like Takita Osamu in Prehistory of the Partisans – is a part of your film style. In other films, while using close-ups extremely well, you also shoot interviews in a long shot where you yourself appear on screen. Do you think the two are related?*

Well, this probably won't answer your question but I do like editing. In the editing room I put the brakes on my subjectivist tendencies. Or maybe it's just that I want to take long shots as a form of expressing self-criticism. When I appear on screen in an interview, there's a psychology of wanting to be seen objectively: I really like close-ups, but visually there's a violent, compulsory power to them.

That's the frightening power of film: it may be odd to say so, but it has a fascist feel to it. That's why, by using a long shot, I'm able to return to a critical point of view. On the other hand you could say I do it because I know about my bad habit of being taken in by the power of close ups.

Hypothesizing about editing, I guess when I'm on location shooting, I feel I have to take a long shot to emphasize the position where I am.

Yasui: *I'd like to ask about your relationship to Ogawa Productions. How did you end up shooting Prehistory of the Partisans for Ogawa Productions?*

I had been freelance for a long time. I talked about the themes of revolution and violence with Ogawa Shinsuke and he asked me if I wouldn't do it at Ogawa Productions. This was still before the Minamata Series. It was right after they finished the first Sanrizuka film and were in the process of shooting the continuation.

The Kyoto Partisans were in Kyoto and Osaka, so Ichiyama Ryūji of the Ogawa Productions Kansai office helped in production. That was back when I was itching to do something, so I was really excited. I'm really grateful to him.

Gerow: *This year at Yamagata, we'll be screening both your Minamata films from the 1970s and Ogawa Shinsuke's Sanrizuka work. As directors who knew each other from Iwanami, what points do you think you have in common? How are you different?*

That's something for other people to indicate, not something I decide.

Yasui: *But both of you must have been conscious of each other. The other guy's making this, so I should make...*

There's none of that in me.

I had the same experience of being in Ao no Kai with Ogawa Shinsuke and for decades after that, talking about films together was everything. When we spoke together, he was the one who did most of the talking. [laughs]

Positively speaking, the main difference between myself and him was, just as he said, that I continued to work for Iwanami Productions on a freelance contract. He was entirely a friend of mine through the Ao no Kai and never once did we work together on location. We never saw the conflicts of each other's location sites.

After I made *An Engineer's Assistant*, I severed my contract with Iwanami. Up until then I had made around a dozen or so TV films and was able to meet Segawa and Ise. While being put through the wringer by my producer and having the accountant complaining about the budget to me, I gained a lot of experience. But, in the case of Ogawa Shinsuke, he left Iwanami and went out on his own while still an assistant director. He put together a staff with friends from the Ao no Kai including Okumura Yūji and the soundman Kubota Yukio. You could say that he blazed the trail of independent production while already aware of his inexperience in direction. He told me many times about the difference in our respective handicaps. [laughs]

His love for film was real. He kept his zest for film study and that atmosphere of group research around him until the day he died. I've always admired that. Unlike me, he also watched lots of films – he loved films more than anything. For me, wherever he was, you could sense there was always a feel of diligent film study in the air: Sanrizuka, Yamagata, Berlin (the film festival), or wherever. At the internment ceremony in Gifu I said, "Ogawa Shinsuke was unique and excellent, the only filmmaker in the world who was a student of the art of cinema." [laughs]

But among filmmakers, you can't say that you're never jealous of your companions. If I said I wasn't, I'd be lying. [laughs] But returning to your original question, there was absolutely no sense of rivalry of "well they're doing this so we should too," because I was just overtaken by filming and screening the Minamata Series, especially in the 1970s.

Looking back on those times, both Ogawa Productions and you at Minamata were making films without sponsors. On a financial level, that was pretty amazing.

On the issue of raising capital, Takagi Ryutaro (the producer) really worked hard. He did more than what was thought humanly possible to gather the necessary funds. After all, we were able to continue to make Minamata films in a series. I know he must have suffered over that debt for a long time. The presidency of Seirinsha passed on to Sho Kojirō, but I still think everything isn't completely settled yet.

It's clear that the continuity of Minamata disease regulated the series. When I made the first feature length film *Minamata - Kanjasan to sono sekai* [*Minamata - The Victims and Their World*], I said everything I wanted to say and thought that was that. But I was criticized later by the people who saw it the world around for not including any "medical explanation" for Minamata disease. Actually, this film was made right in the middle of the court proceedings and the medical world was very uncooperative. Even though we knew there was an expansive amount of film for academic use at the Medical Faculty of Kumamoto University, the gates were shut tight to us. The reason being, "We cannot in any way influence the court's decision."

After the ruling on the Minamata case in March of 1973, I foresaw an ebb in the vigor that had held up until then. As a feeling, rather than it being an ebb tide, it was more along the lines of a self-directed incantation which said people shouldn't run away. [laughs] Thankfully, Takagi really had a strong desire to make a medical film and so we were able to push through with that.

In actuality, the school gates opened for about a year or two after the court's ruling was handed down giving an overwhelming victory to the patients. Films like *Igaku toshite no Minamatabyō* [*Minamata Disease - A Trilogy*] and *Shiranuikai* [*The Shiranui Sea*] could be made because of perfect timing. In the two year planning and editing period, I was able to concurrently produce four films. Because of that, the flow of capital was terrible. Takagi must have walked around peddling it to every medical school in the country, but we couldn't sell it like we thought we might. He had one uphill fight after another.

One thing else I'd like to ask is about when you took the Minamata films and showed them around the world. You seem to put considerable effort into not just making, but also showing your films. What was your purpose there?

A Minamata film was first presented abroad in the early 1970s at the United Nations Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm. I was brought over by environmental activists from around the world and visited Europe and Moscow.

Then around 1975, Minamata disease broke out amongst the indigenous peoples of Canada (Indians) and I went at the urgent request of local volunteers. In Canada I showed the film on the "Minamata Film Tour" starting from Vancouver on the Pacific Ocean and running across the country all the way over to Quebec on the Atlantic Ocean side. It took over a hundred and some days.

In those days the Japanese Government thought that Minamata was a national embarrassment and didn't want us to show films like this abroad. We showed the film to everyone from the indigenous peoples and medical professionals in the affected cities to university, provincial, and national officials. I got a good idea of how the native peoples were treated by the whites. The Minamata victims also opened their arms with compassion to their younger brothers with the same disease.

On the other side of the bay from Minamata, on the islands off the coast of Amakusa and Kagoshima, I spent over a hundred and some days going around showing Minamata films with my staff with a simple intention: I knew that although there were many Minamata victims there, through pressure from either the villages or fishing organizations, they wouldn't allow the film to be shown. At first I didn't think I would take my staff. I was in the peak of my filmmaking days then and said, "Have the supporters of the Minamata case do the showings." But in the 1970s the people who supported the Minamata cause were called communists, Trotskyists, and terrorists. Since Takita Osamu from *Prehistory of the Partisans* had gone underground, and I as a result had my house searched by the police, you could tell they were treating me as a "terrorist director."

However, when the people who made the film say, "We want to offer a chance to the people who need to see this most," and go off on their own to the polluted areas and villages showing the film, no one can stop them. If you try, then it'll get done. The four of us did it, including Koike Masato, who is now a director and will be in the symposium at this year's Yamagata Film Festival. In addition, there was Nishiyama Masahiro, who's the director of *Mizu kara no sokutatsu* [*Message from Earth*], and the cameraman Ichinose Masashi.

During the showings we would stop and explain things and sometimes I was in a cold sweat.

I read about that somewhere and wondered why you stopped the film.

Although I was trying to be careful, it was a metropolitan montage, I guess you could say. The tempo is fast and even I was in a hurry. What the people in the fishing villages without information were most worried about was whether or not they knew the disease was contagious or hereditary. It was a big problem back then when people would say, "Don't marry into a family with Minamata disease, and don't have them marry into your family."

I make films so that anyone watching them can understand. This is just common sense. But when the people whom I most wanted to see it were right before my eyes, I would get carried away with things I wanted to forcefully emphasize because that would probably be the only time I would be able to show the film there. The place where we stopped the film was predecided. It was the scene of the experiment with mice that most clearly explained the development of fetal Minamata patients. Although Minamata disease is a type of poisoning and therefore not communicable like bacteria, it is often mistaken for a communicable disease. Moreover, those with fetal Minamata were considered to have a malignant hereditary disease and they were discriminated against strongly. It was stated in the film that the fetus became ill because its pregnant mother ate fish contaminated with mercury, that it was not hereditary. However, I thought the pace was too fast, so we'd stop and repeat it, pointing and explaining like with a slide lecture. This was really well received. In our road show, we were able to show this to over 8,000 people, and out of that 1,000 put in claims of being Minamata victims, a problem that still remains today.

But when you think about it, as a filmmaker, having to stop your own film is really pitiful. It makes you break out in a cold sweat. But, after going back to where we showed the film, I feel good about it now.

Next, I'd like to ask you about the "Tokyo-Minamata" exhibition next year.

Next year will mark the 40th anniversary since the official discovery of Minamata disease. I want to put together a chance for people individually to think about what Minamata disease was. What I'm doing right now is collecting photos of the departed victims who have only been thought of in terms of "total number of dead: x thousand x hundred people" and try to line up the faces of each of the people who have passed away from Minamata disease. This project isn't a film, but I think it will mesh ultimately with the topic.

Everyday the family prepares a tray for the deceased for the repose of their souls. I came to understand well the various ways each household grieves. But, how does one grieve socially? In other words, how do we etch this calamity in our memories? That's why I made a "Memory and Prayer" corner in the Minamata-Tokyo exhibition. I plan to spend a year collecting and duplicating photographs. Unfortunately, at the time of the Yamagata Film Festival this October, I'll be right in the last stages of my project, touring around the islands off shore, so I won't be able to attend.

I have the feeling that for the Minamata films, showing is not enough. For example, what is happening with Minamata today? If we don't let people know about that it's no good. This is what everyone who's helping with the Minamata-Tokyo exhibition knows, and that's why we're placing such importance on the hundred some odd photos of the departed.

My entrance into Minamata disease was getting angry at Chisso, asking if it was OK to have this; a hatred towards a government that had watched the fishermen die without extending a hand to help and towards doctors who are stuck to the system; and a loathing towards social discrimination. From now it will take at least half a century from the reoccurrence of Minamata to new developments. The Minamata-Tokyo exhibition is one step in that direction I would like to take.

The original landscape of Minamata I saw thirty years ago exists only on film. It was a tragic indictment of letting people die that occurred on the dark underside to the era of high growth. But forty years after it, ironically, at least on the surface, there are signs that the glory of the era of high growth is breaking through to the surface. That people say "you don't see Minamata disease anymore" is one sign of that.

My exhibition of the photos of the deceased is what I call "the primary colours of the Minamata disease scandal." These last ten months in my visits to the victims I have been taking pictures of the photos of the deceased with a regular camera. And right now I have managed to reproduce several hundred of them.

Whether it's Auschwitz or Okinawa, the way humans' foolish deeds are left behind, the way things are remembered, can be found in one form through an exhibition of photos of the dead. In ancient times, there were only paintings and words. That's the reason that the 20th century is called the century of images. At the Minamata-Tokyo exhibition, I intend to include authors, painters, photographers, and in addition doctors, scientists, social scientists, performance, arts, and goods. I think it just might be a valuable event.

By the way, collecting photographs of the dead is a stress-filled job. Therefore, it makes me really want to make a movie. I think I've already taken about 30 hours on video already. By filming I can take a deep breath; it's a good change of pace. Now, here (in a room at a Minamata inn) I have three video cameras. Sometimes I run them like I'm taking a "Minamata Diary." I'm not planning on making it a film, just a video diary. My long dormant desire to become a cameraman is at last coming through. [laughs] But shooting an interview by oneself is hard.

Gerow: *But there are many young directors who do that, who do interviews while running the camera themselves.*

Technology has improved and one of the most convenient things about video is that you can shoot it yourself. But this is a source of unease and I'm worried about it. I especially want a cameraman when I have an interview. I interview my subject

and when I get to the best part, I don't want to shoot it with a camera. A thread of reaction begins to take place between the subject and myself. When that happens the mental part paying attention to matters of size and focus seems to go out the window. If I look through the lens, I do things like overuse the zoom, and so it's only natural that I can't get into the story. If you have a cameraman, then you know he's going to shot the subject right. When I get to the crux of the problem, the cameraman should close in; or I could just give him a sign. I don't lose my concentration. But when I'm running the camera, I'm afraid I'll ruin the climax. If I can synchronize the discoveries I make in the interview with what the cameraman finds through the lens that's the greatest. And besides, taking a distanced stance is hard to do when you're by yourself. It's probably because you soon find yourself lost in the world of the frame. These days I keep rediscovering that, unlike photographs, film, with sound and action, requires several staff members. [laughs]

Is it because you want to interview from a position more intimate than that of the camera?

As for me, my attitude when interviewing and when shooting are two different things – they split up. I worry so much I wonder if this isn't the very structure of the brain. You have discoveries when it's a direct interview, one by one. But it's hard to match those discoveries with concentrating on the visuals. If you can roll the camera while doing an interview that's good, but I can't.

When my collection of the photos of the deceased is finished, and I get down to making my "Minamata Diary" into a real film, I'll get my old staff together and work together with my favorite cameramen.

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