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Towards a Cinema of Absence: Satō Makoto in the Japanese and International Context

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Abstract

This paper explores the last three documentaries made by Japanese filmmaker Sato Makoto before his early death in 2007. *Self and Others* (2000), *Memories of Agano* (2004), and *Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said* (2005). They are not only a prime example of his uniqueness in the recent history of Japanese cinema, but also a triptych that, albeit in retrospect, could put Sato on the international documentary map and give him the rightful place in the history of cinema. This is at least one of the goals of this essay. These works also reflect and partially crystallize some of the main developments undertaken by Japanese documentary in the last fifty years. In addition, I analyze how Sato was also a very "international" documentarian: Curious and aware of what was going on in the documentary scene around the world and always open to exploring and charting new territories, as he was also a theorist who authored some very important volumes on nonfiction cinema, his last movies have an essayistic and experimental quality that bears a close affinity to the works of Chris Marker and Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Keywords: Japan Documentary; Absence; Experimental Documentary; Sato Makoto; Ogawa Pro.

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Ogawa Pro

Even if an innocent piece of reality is reflected in film footage, by recomposing that reality the film becomes nothing other than fiction. I think that the critical nature of documentary films depends on the way reconstructed fiction presents reality in a critical light.

(Satō 2001a)

Empty spaces, long, slow tracking shots, incomprehensible speeches, ghostly presences and a cinema of opacity and self-reflexivity are not usually traits linked to documentary, or at least not to the nonfiction movies made in contemporary Japan. Between 2000 and 2005, Japanese documentarist and film theorist Satō Makoto explored the fringes of documentary and the boundaries of the cinema of the real in a way that very few directors from his country ever did, and found himself more in tune with the international world of nonfiction cinema. The existing literature produced in the West on documentary cinema in Japan is, while on the rise, still scarce, one notable exception is the fundamental and groundbreaking work done by Mark Abé Nornes with his two volumes about the documentaries of Ogawa Production (Nornes 2007) and those made in the first fifty years since the advent of cinema (Nornes 2003). The academic production on the subject is even thinner if we consider the development of nonfiction cinema in the archipelago during the last thirty years, a lack of interest probably caused also by the not-always inspiring quality of the works created. Nevertheless it is undeniable and agreeable that 'a detailed account of the modern Japanese documentary film has yet to be undertaken' (Bingham 2015: 147). Bingham has written important and illuminating pages on the subject, and stressed the importance of Satō's documentaries (Bingham 2015: 144-170) as well, however it is almost an isolated case, and the connections between Satō's aesthetic approach and that of his fellow documentarians around the world are not particularly touched in his essay, a volume that focuses on Japanese cinema. On the other hand, the inclusion of an article about Fujiwara Toshi's *Mujin Chitai| No Man's Zone* (2012) (Bohr 2019: 159–171) in a volume about essay films in the context of world cinema (Hollweg and Krstić 2019), points towards a more desirable scenario, or at least a more transnational approach that the present article endorses and wishes to explore.

Satō came into prominence in the documentary world of Japan during the end of the 1980s, when he began living communally in the city of Agano in the mountains of Niigata, an area where the population was afflicted by Minamata disease, a neurological disorder caused by methyl mercury poisoning which was first discovered in the city from which it takes its name in 1956. While living, farming and fishing with his staff and the local people as a way of sustaining his film project and integrating with the area and its inhabitants, Satō shot the daily lives of the people affected by the disease. *Aga ni Ikiru|Living on the River Agano* (1992), the result of these three years, was highly praised, and Satō won recognition for his unique and eclectic approach towards the inhabitants of the area. Focusing on the daily life of the people, following them in their seasonal habits and showing the smiles and the amusing moments in their lives, rather than concentrating on the illness, fights and the legal aspects of the disease, Satō and his crew brought a breath of fresh air in the world of Japanese documentary, and at the same time reflected a paradigm shift in style and attitude that had started to surface in Japan in the mid-seventies.

Satō, born in Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture in 1957, majored in philosophy at the University of Tokyo and worked as an assistant director for Katori Naotaka on *Muko naru Umi|Innocent Sea: Minamata* (1982). After *Living on the River Agano*, he moved on to exploring the creativity and imagination of people with disabilities in two touching and lively works, *Mahiru no hoshi|Artists in Wonderland* (1998) and *Hanako* (2001). But it was at the turn of the century that the Japanese director artistically flourished and realized his most daring and aesthetically provocative works. Besides his work as a director, Satō was also an active member of Japanese documentary circles and was involved at different stages with the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, a lecturer at the Film School of Tokyo, a producer of television programs, a professor at the Kyoto University of Art and Design, a fine film editor and, most importantly for us here, a cinema and documentary essayist and theorist.

In recent years Satō's documentaries seem to be again part of the filmic discourse in his country, or at least on the rise in some cinematic circles. *Living on River Agano* has been screened repeatedly around Japan from 2012 onwards for the 20th anniversary of the film's release, and the year 2016 saw the publication of

Nichijō to fuzai wo mitsumete, dokyumentarii eiga sakka Satō Makoto no tetsugaku/Gazing at everyday and absence: the philosophy of documentarian Makoto Satō, a book tackling Satō's films and writings from a variety of different perspectives and raising the level of discourse about Satō's oeuvre by liberating it from a 'mere' documentary perspective. The title of the volume summarizes and conveys perfectly the preoccupations and the themes embodied in the latter part of his career, a poetic of absence and a sense of emptiness and ephemerality of the everyday life that particularly informs three of his documentaries: *Self And Others* (2000), *Aga no Kioku/Memories of Agano* (2004) and *Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said* (2005). Although the latter was his last work and has many traits in common with the other two, it is a less aesthetically boundary-pushing documentary and thus will be taken into consideration in this article only in passing.

Satō considered documentary a form of fiction (Satō 2007: 8), but at the same time 'an action of gazing persistently at the ways of the world' (Satō 2001a), or, to use Bill Nichols' words, 'Neither a fictional invention nor a factual reproduction, documentary draws on and refers to historical reality while representing it from a distinctive perspective' (Nichols 2001: 6-7). The idea of nonfiction cinema as developed by Satō, particularly in the last part of his career, seems to resonate more with that emerged in Europe and North America during the 1920s at the dawn of documentary, when it was considered 'an extraction from and organization of reality—a fabrication, but one that thereby brought forward a new reality' (Cowie 2011: 2). From its beginnings, documentary film has never ceased to mutate and evolve, expanding its boundaries and intermingling with other forms of cinema. It is as if, applying Sarah Atkinson's description of cinema to nonfiction, documentary was 'and always has been in a perpetual state of becoming' (Atkinson 2014: 1), a battle ground where the meaning(s) and the frontiers of documentary need to be continuously destroyed and asserted anew.

Memories of Agano and *Self and Others* both occupy this perpetual battlefield, opposing and partly deconstructing the idea of documentary as a form of visual activism and as a direct and clear representation of reality, while exploring themes such as memory, absence, the politics of representation, and how cinema is at the same time part of memory (personal and collective) and an active agent of its fabrication. To be completely fair, these are problematics that have been present in Satō's films since the beginning of his career, but in these two documentaries in particular, they rise to the surface, becoming prominent cinematic attributes. These two works also both reflect and partially crystallize some of the main developments undertaken by Japanese documentary in the last fifty years and, at the same time, show a way toward future possibilities for both Japanese and international documentaries. Finally, and most importantly, their essayistic and experimental quality bear a close affinity to the works of such authors as Chris Marker, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jonas Mekas, as theorists and filmmakers, and to the aesthetics of other visual artists active in Asia and in the rest of the world.

1 Filming Absence

> *To be able to feel this Void at the core of every reality (...) radically shifts our outlook on life.*
>
> (Trinh 2013: chap. 13)

Photographer Gochō Shigeo, born in Niigata, was diagnosed in infancy with a rare disease that would keep him in hospitals for very long periods of time and would put his life constantly under the threat of death before taking it at the young age of 36 years old. Pursuing his dreams, he moved to Tokyo at the age of 21 where, between working various jobs, he published three books of photography. The best-known of these, *Self and Others* (1977), is a series of anodyne portraits of everyday people capturing the fleeting moments of their lives. Satō decided to make a sort of collage film using Gochō's photographs, letters, voice recordings, and home movies and visiting and filming the places where the photographer had lived. Infused with a sensibility derived directly from Gochō's photos, the movie opens with a very long shot of a tree gently swaying in the wind, setting up an aesthetic of slow and relatively long takes focusing on unimportant glimpses of the city that make up the majority of the film. The result is a beautiful and lyrical visual experiment, neither a biography nor an essay, but something that eschews any easy definitions and acts more like an attempt to recreate one of the possible identities of Gochō through the artifacts and traces that he has left in his brief time on earth. Like the book of photography itself, the film tries to convey on-screen the space and tension between the self, Gochō, the filming gaze and the viewer, the people in the photos, the empty places portrayed in the movie and, more generally, the world outside. Viewing the film is at the same time disquieting and enigmatic, and

the beautiful music composed and performed by Kyōmarō plays a significant role in its poetic effect. With its insistence on empty urban landscapes depicted through long tracking shots and the importance of photos capturing unimportant moments, the movie is almost a return to the documentary-style films of the dawn of cinema, showing a fresh perspective that signaled a shift in Satō's poetics and a new starting point for him as a film-maker.

Figure 1. A tree swaying in the wind, still from *Self and Others*

In 2002, ten years after the release of *Living on the River Agano* and two years after *Self and Others*, Satō went back to Niigata with an idea for a new film. Satō described the project, originally titled *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 Taishō era (1910s) left behind by photographer Ishizuka Saburō. Using those old black and white photographs as a motif, we started out making the film with the same concept as Shigeo Gochō in *Self and Others* (Satō 2005).

However, after consulting with Tamura Masaki, director of photography on *Self and Others*, Satō decided to shoot the movie with Kobayashi Shigeru, the cameraman who worked and lived with Satō in Niigata on his debut film, *Living on the River Agano*. The original idea of the movie turned into something very different, and the shooting was also postponed the following year, as in 2002 Satō obtained a fellowship and spent a year in England, an experience that was formative for the director and that likely had a profound impact on the way he would consider and rethink cinema and nonfiction.

Released in 2004, *Memories of Agano* depicts the return of Satō and Kobayashi to the place where they had lived and filmed more than a decade before, meeting old friends and seeing the places where they had stayed. The relatively short movie, only 55 minutes long, is an experimental piece of cinema disguised as a personal documentary. Shot on 16mm film,[1] the movie elliptically explores a series of themes and preoccupations that Satō partially touches on in *Self and Others*. If that movie focuses on the absence of Gochō and, more broadly, on that of the subjects depicted in his photos, the core of *Memories of Agano* is the absence of all the people

1. Satō throughout his career worked almost exclusively on 16mm, 35mm and video format (for TV).

who had passed away in Agano over the course of a decade. Abandoned fields, old houses, woods, nature, river, mountains and trees, in all their beauty, resonate with the feeling of absence and emptiness of the film, making absence here more of a harbinger and symbol of death and nothingness than in *Self and Others*. Besides conveying on-screen the inevitable passing of time, *Memories of Agano* delves deeply into the ontological absence that is embedded in the act of representation. One of the most stunning scenes of the movie in this regard takes place at the very beginning, when Satō and Kobayashi, after returning to the area where the first movie was shot, hang a large canvas tarp in the middle of the woods and project on it the documentary they had made ten years before.

Figure 2. Living on the River Agano projected on a tarp, still from *Memories of Agano*

The ghostly images of the past create a mirroring effect and a *mise en abyme* where memories, past and present, are short-circuited in an infinite loop. Images/memories are like tangible ghosts and are, as it were, not a way to retain or bring back a past that has already disappeared, but a first threshold to oblivion. Yet the result – and this is one of the great achievements of *Memories of Agano* – is a movie imbued with a sense of acceptance and of soothing melancholy. Filming everyday landscapes and focusing on objects such as boiling tea pots, old wooden houses and tools is one of the threads that weaves through the film's fabric, signaling a contrapuntal relationship between the persistent and the ephemeral in life. The scene that embodies most this contrapuntal aesthetic is an almost-static shot of a teapot boiling on an old stove, a scene that lasts about five minutes, while, in the background, the words of an old lady spoken in a thick Niigata accent act as a sort of white noise. She chats sparsely with Satō himself, talking (half-jokingly and half-seriously) about the fact that she does not want to be filmed. This acts as breaking of the so-called fourth wall, a dialogue between camera and filmed object that is also prominent in *Living on River Agano*.[2]

Like Self and Others, aesthetically *Memories of Agano* presents itself as a documentary of opacity rather than one of transparency. The choice of not using subtitles when people speak in thick Niigata accents, very little of which a Japanese citizen from another area would likely understand,[3] heralds a major change in Satō's approach. Feeding the viewer with limpid, clear messages and making a comprehensible movie is not what interests Satō here. The film is full of obstacles and visual riddles, peaceful but anodyne landscapes, and visually-striking moments of pure experimentation that punctuate and intensify the viewing experience. For instance, around the middle of the movie there is a close-up of an old woman, an image taken from the first film in Agano, projected on a tarp in slow motion and so distorted that she ends up looking like an otherworldly presence; after a few seconds the screen almost turns into an abstract painting, an hodgepodge of blue tonalities à la Klee. The soundscape also contributes to the mesmerizing feeling evoked by the film. Conversations and

2. 'Are you filming me? [...] Don't shoot me!' are sentences that punctuate the course of this movie and the one made in 1992 as well.

3. A technical option used in *Living on the River Agano*.

mutterings between Satō and people whom he befriended ten years before are juxtaposed over images of old houses' interiors, gardens in ruins and woods, all without the speakers identified. As we have seen, words are used here more for their musical than communicational quality. A similar effect is obtained in *Self and Others* through the juxtaposition of the urban landscapes and the photos on the one hand and the words written by Gochō himself in his diaries and letters on the other, using asynchronous sound to create a space, an emptiness, and a discrepancy that the viewer is welcome to fill with his or her personal experience.

Figure 3. An abstract-like painting, still from *Memories of Agano*

For all these reasons, while *Self and Others* and *Memories of Agano* incorporate some of the essential qualities of traditional documentaries, they also escape the organizing discourse typical of nonfiction cinema, where reality and its representation are almost never problematized and often considered as a given, expanding the possibilities of documentary film towards new and less-charted territory. On a formal level, this is obtained by the omission of any usual dialogue or a straightforward narrative, thus pushing the more cinematic aspects to the forefront. While both are superficially structured at the outset as films about memory, as the viewer delves deeper, it becomes clear how they are first and foremost about creating and exploring possible cinematic temporalities. They slowly envelop the viewer in a thick and peculiar perception of time and space, and like the best works of hybrid documentary, where one predominant mode of documentary, as identified by Bill Nichols, cannot be clearly established and fiction and nonfiction are often blurred, they are a cinematic experience of time, of different modes of time. It is for these reasons that Satō's last effort, *Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said*, a movie shot in Jerusalem, Cairo, and Beirut capturing on-camera places where Edward Said lived, while sharing with the former two films an initial attention towards absence, landscapes and a time of remembering, does not match them on a formal and perceptual level.

2 The context of Japanese documentary

To explore how Satō's films both rely on and drift away from the cinematic traditions of which they are a part, it seems here necessary to historicize and position his oeuvre in the context and development of contemporary Japanese documentary.

Tsuchimoto Noriaki and Ogawa Shinsuke are considered two of the towering figures in Japanese post-war independent nonfiction cinema (Bingham 2009 166-175) (Nornes 2011: 2) In fact, both were very influential from the mid-sixties onward in the development of documentary in Japan and Asia, and their filmmaking no doubt had a great influence on Satō himself. Ogawa, and his collective, Ogawa Production, came to prominence during the 1960s and 1970s with the *Narita* series, seven works made between 1968 and 1977 documenting the resistance of the farmers in Sanrizuka to land expropriation and the construction of Narita International Airport. Although at an international level the most well-known of these documentaries is probably *Nihon*

kaihō sensen – Sanrizuka no natsu/*Summer in Narita* (1968), among scholars and Japanese filmmakers the most admired of them remains *Sanrizuka – Heta Buraku*/*Narita: Heta Village* (1973). According to Abé Markus Nornes, 'This film was the turning point of independent documentary filmmaking in Japan. After years filming the long-standing struggles at Sanrizuka, the filmmakers became more and more immersed in the life of the people and the village' (Nornes 2016)

At around the same time, Tsuchimoto began, with *Minamata: Kanjasan to sono sekai*/*Minamata—The Victims and Their World* (1971), what would eventually become his life work, the *Minamata* series, thirteen documentaries made over a span of more than 30 years following and delving into the lives and battles of the people of Minamata, the city in Kumamoto prefecture where the eponymous disease was first discovered. The seventh film in the series was *Shiranuikai*/*The Shiranui Sea* (1975), a powerful documentary that, just like *Narita: Heta Village*, embodies an aesthetic shift in Japanese documentary. *The Shiranui Sea* is 'not actually a film about Minamata Disease. It's a film about people living their lives and what that means' (Fujiwara 2007).

Satō considered these two works the peak of their respective series. In a speech that he gave at the Tokyo Athénée Français in 2005, he stated that it was Tsuchimoto's notion of *hikaru kanja* ('bright victims') that inspired his approach to the people of Agano in his first documentary: depicting their everyday lives and happy moments, not only the suffering and the tragedy. At the same occasion, Satō also made clear how the two films, even if they were part of the so-called *undō no eiga* ('movement cinema'), also signal an intention to go beyond it. Especially in *Narita: Heta Village*, a movie he often wrote and talked about, Satō saw an aesthetic shift towards capturing the 'time of the village,'[4] a change made possible by moving the filming attitude from 'attacking' to 'waiting'. According to Satō, one of the most active advocates for this turning point was, besides Ogawa himself, Fukuda Katsuhiko, assistant director for *Narita: Heta Village* and a person who directly influenced and helped Satō on many occasions during his career.[5]

All these problematics were processed and re-elaborated by Satō's sensibility during his entire career. The aforementioned 'bright victims' concept informed his debut *Living on the River Agano*, where, as we have seen, the attention is more focused towards the everyday activities of the people, while the 'waiting' attitude for conveying on film the time of a specific place is brought to its extreme in *Memories of Agano*, *Self and Others* and, to a lesser extent, *Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said*. Ogawa and Tsuchimoto with their masterpieces *Narita: Heta Village* and *The Shiranui Sea*, respectively, are thus the presences haunting and informing the last part of Satō's career. Yet there are other and more material connections between these films and film-makers. Tamura Masaki, cinematographer of *Narita: Heta Village* and the documentaries made by Ogawa Production in Yamagata, worked for Satō in *Self and Others*, contributing to the documentary with his ability to capture the flow of time on film. Ōtsu Kōshirō, another cinematographer and cameraman who worked with Ogawa in his first films in Sanrizuka, was behind the camera in *The Shiranui Sea* and many films of the *Minamata* series, and was also the director of photography who travelled to the Middle East with Satō for *Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said*.

While *Living on the River Agano* could be seen as a direct continuation of a documentary approach derived from Ogawa Production, that is, film as a result and process of merging between subject filming and object filmed, Satō's movies about art and disabilities[6] are a way of carving the otherness into the 'normality' of everyday life. With *Self and Others* and more so with *Memories of Agano*, Satō took a leap forward, starting to experiment with different areas of image-making such as personal documentary, essay film and experimental cinema. Both works focus heavily on landscapes and absence, and thus have some kind of commonality with fūkeiron ('landscape theory') as embodied at the end of the 1960s in the films and writings of Mamoru Sasaki, Matsuda Masao and Adachi Masao, a theory that 'approached the image of landscape in terms of state power, and governmental control over urban space in particular' (Furuhata 2013: introduction). Albeit far from the

4. For an in-depth analysis of Ogawa Production and Japanese documentary in general, *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary* (Nornes 2007).

5. Fukuda's most well-known documentary, *Kusatori sōshi*/*A Grasscutter's Tale* (1985) was often quoted by Satō as an inspiration.

6. *Hanako* and *Artists in Wonderland* are two documentaries depicting the lives of people with disabilities and their activities as artists, Japan has a long and rich history of documentaries devoted to physically and mentally challenged people: the films of Yanagisawa Hisao, *Sayonara CP* (1972) by Hara Kazuo, or *Seishin*/*Mental* (2008) by Sōda Kazuhiro just to name a few. Satō, albeit continuing inside this trend, is also swerving away from it by complicating the picture with the unanswered question 'what is art'?

explicit political framing of these works, the images of landscapes that compose *Self and Others*, *Memories of Agano* and even *Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said* deeply resonate with Adachi's *Ryakushō renzoku shasatsuma|Aka Serial Killer* (1969) and Ōshima Nagisa's *Tokyo Sensō Sengo Hiwa|The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1970), two of the main examples of landscape theory. Even more deep and significant are the connections, but also the discrepancies, between *Memories of Agano* and the Japanese self-documentary[7] (or personal documentary) scene, a world that Satō often criticized for its simplicity and lack of cinematic quality (Wada-Marciano 2012: 69-70). Japan produced some important and seminal works in this 'genre', such as Hara Kazuo's *Gokushiteki erosu: Renka 1974|Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974* (1974) and, in the same decade, the poetic and personal essays of Suzuki Shirōyasu, including perhaps his most famous work, *Nichibotsu no inshō|Impressions of a Sunset* (1975). From the 1990s onward, the general attitude towards self-documentary from most Japanese film-makers shifted towards a cinema that is often narcissistic and lacking any real attention to more formal and cinematic aspects of filmmaking. With *Memories of Agano*, in contrast, Satō attempted to push the self-documentary and the essayistic style of film towards new and aesthetically inventive territories, and in doing so was more in tune with works from the rest of the world than those made in Japan.

Satō was by no means the first director to be critical of the Japanese attitude towards self-documentary. Matsumoto Toshio, a director and artist primarily known outside Japan for *Bara no sōretsu|Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) and who started his career as a documentarist, on more than one occasion has expressed his concerns and doubts on the matter. At the beginning of his career Matsumoto made two stunning documentaries, *Ishi no uta|The Song of Stones* (1960) and *Nishijin* (1963), movies that challenged the boundaries of what, at the time, was considered documentary, in a similar manner to the films of Satō forty years later. Extremely important from a theoretical point of view are also *Zen'ei kiroku eigaron|A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary* (1958, 1963) and others writings that Matsumoto published in the following years, where he 'rejected a style of documentary realism, which privileged the factuality of the referent over the plasticity of the image' (Furuhata 2013: chap. 1). This approach is extremely evident in *The Song of Stones*, where the poetic and the experimental are particularly blended. The still photos taken at the Aji village in Shikoku, an area famous for its granite production, are edited rhythmically in tune to an eerie and minimal music score. According to Matsumoto, the parallel is obvious: like the stonecutters of the blocks of granite, the artist is making cinema by breathing life into 'dead' images. Satō and Matsumoto thus, although from two different generations, shared some similar preoccupations about the politics of the image and the representation of reality. Both of them criticized a neat division between fiction and nonfiction, objective and subjective and, as previously written, a certain tendency in Japanese self-documentary.[8] For Satō it was also important to stress the difference between documentary and simple political activism:

> Documentaries are mirrors that reflect the world critically. They are not tools for social change or weapons for political statement, but rather 'a critique through visual expression,' an action of gazing persistently at the ways of the world with a dispassionate eye (Satō 2001a).

Such a conceptualization does not seem to be much in tune with the world of Japanese documentary today. Sōda Kazuhiro and the *Tokai Terebi Documentary* group for instance, two of the finest examples of contemporary nonfiction in Japan, although authors of significant documentaries and theoretically engaged with Satō's legacy,[9] embody a different approach to documentary, observational the former, more politically and socially charged, the latter. However, there are two directors whose works bear some similarities with the two movies analyzed in this article. In *Fensu|Fence* (2008) and particularly in *No Man's Zone|Mujin chitai* (2012), filmed soon after the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, director Fujiwara Toshi re-elaborates many of the problematics tackled by Satō in the last part of his career,[10] such as the connection between memory and landscape,

7. For an excursus of Japanese self-documentary: Self-Documentary: Its Origins and Present State (Hisashi 2005).

8. 'I felt this debate over fact versus fiction was not very fruitful: what was important was how to inquire into the trilateral relationship between the artist, the real world, and film. Isn't the extremely fascinating thing about cinema the fact that it instead dissolves the binary divisions between fact and fiction, between objective and subjective?' (Matsumoto 1996).

9. Sōda was a guest speaker during "Tokushū jōei: Satō Makoto no fuzai o mitsumete" a Satō's retrospective held at the Athénée Français in Tokyo in 2016.

10. The director once listed on Facebook his favorite Japanese documentaries of all time, among which he put *Memories of Agano*, *The Shiranui Sea* and *Narita: Heta Village*.

absence, and a philosophical frame to place the tragedy of the earthquake and the subsequent nuclear disaster in a broader context. *Aragane* (2015) is a particular case in Japanese nonfiction film, made by Oda Kaoru at the Béla Tarr's Film Factory school in Sarajevo, the work reflects the time and the space of the place filmed, a Bosnian coal mine, an experiment in duration and visual perception stylistically similar to the approach adopted by Satō in *Memories of Agano* and *Self and Others*.

As we have seen, although there are some significant connections and vital inspirations from the world of Japanese documentary, in his late career Satō was beginning to move away from it and, consciously or unconsciously, getting spiritually closer to a hybrid idea of nonfiction cinema as practiced and theorized by his colleagues around the world. I will explore this resonance and its implications in the next section of my article.

3 Satō in the international context

In what is considered his theoretical masterwork, *Dokyumentarii eiga no chihei – Hihan teki shiko ni uketomeru tame ni*/*The Horizons of Documentary Film – To Understand the World Critically* (2001), Satō explores in eight chapters the different modes of documentary, analyzing two different directors in each segment; Robert J. Flaherty, Kamei Fumio, Frederick Wiseman, Ogawa Shinsuke, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, Robert Kramer, Ōshima Nagisa, Jonas Mekas, Chris Marker and Trinh Minh-ha are some of the filmmakers discussed in the volume. In 1999, in a list of his favourite documentaries compiled for the Japanese magazine *Litteraire*, Satō chose as his number one the film *Chuyen tu te*/*Living as One Should* (1985) by Tran van Thuy, followed by *Sans Soleil* (1983) by Chris Marker, *Narita: Heta Village*, and *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann (Kiyota 2016: 283). Interesting, too, is the presence in the list of Éric Rohmer's *Le Rayon vert*/*The Green Ray* (1986), a film not considered a documentary. These writings trace an incomplete yet undeniable genealogy of works and authors that had an impact on Satō's cinema. In addition, Satō had a very good knowledge of the history of the medium, an understanding of what was going on in Asia and the rest of the cinema world and a background in philosophy that probably shaped his way of theorizing cinema and nonfiction. His connections with the international documentary world go well beyond what he was able to absorb during the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, which he frequently attended. He was often invited to film festivals outside Japan and spent a year in England, during which time he was likely exposed to a wide variety of movies and cinema experiences. But Satō did not just amass influences: he also found connections and aesthetic affinities between his works and those made outside the archipelago.

Take, for instance, so-called slow cinema. Some of the visual preoccupations traversing the works of the 'movement' are also present in different degrees in Satō's oeuvre. Compared with some of the biggest exponents of slow cinema such as Wang Bing, Lav Diaz or Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Satō's works may not have epic lengths or strong political and social preoccupations (at least not on the surface) yet they share, at the very least, similar intentions, capturing and gazing at the marginal and at rural life in decay or about to vanish, if not already gone, and thus exploring vast areas of forgotten memories and dealing with absences yet to come. There are also some affinities on a formal level. Although the extreme use of long takes that characterizes so deeply the cinema of Diaz and Wang does not find an exact parallel in *Memories of Agano* or *Self and Others* (the longest takes in the works of Satō are just about five minutes) the 'emptiness' of the frames and the sense of duration that they are able to evoke is very akin to those found in the best works of the two Asian authors.

A cinematic world of empty and peripheral spaces, deserted streets and nearly-abandoned old houses built around a meta-filmic centre, *Living on the River Agano* projected on the tarp in the woods in *Memories of Agano* calls to mind the corridors and back rooms in a theatre during the last screening of an old movie as depicted in *Bu san*/*Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003) by Tsai Ming-liang. Central to both films is the concept of cinema as a place and a melancholic time for remembering and dissipating the past. In the Taiwanese movie this loop is activated by screening the wuxia film *Long men kezhan*/*Dragon Inn* (1967) by King Hu. On an aesthetic level *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* pushes the concept of cinematic duration to its limit: most of the shots are still and void of content like the teapot scene in *Memories of Agano* or revelatory moments in *Self and Others*, such as the long tracking shot of a street where Gochō used to live. However, it is in these moments that time and space are linked and almost merge and 'time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' (Bakhtin 1981: 84).

Figure 4. A boiling teapot, still from *Memories of Agano*

The elements of landscapes and duration in Satō's works also share an affinity with the documentaries made in roughly the same period by Ukrainian director Sergei Loznitsa. While Satō captures the ***haikyo*** ('ruins') of the Japanese countryside and those of an unusual, depopulated Tokyo, Loznitsa's works, such as *Poselenie*/*The Settlement* (2001) or *Portret*/*Portrait* (2002), with their grainy black and white static shots of people living in the vast Russian countryside, are even more extreme in this regard. Landscapes are explored by both directors in their relation with time and duration. Long and static shots connected by rare sweeping and slow pans are used in abundance, and Loznitsa and Satō push this aesthetics of stasis to its limits, magnifying every possible small movement and sound in the frame. The opening of *Self and Others*, where the previously-mentioned tree sways in the wind, or other scenes where the camera gazes intensely at cranes looming against the sky, are the best examples of this filmic style.

Lithuanian-American filmmaker, poet and artist Jonas Mekas is not only considered the godfather of American avant-garde cinema but also well-known for his personal and diary films. As we have seen from his writings, Satō was very aware of Mekas' films and it is not too far-fetched to say that he likely adopted a certain self-reflexive quality and a tendency to include chance and random events into his films from the Lithuanian artist. Indeed, Satō used camera troubles and meta-filmic elements beginning with his debut feature. Take the scene in *Living on the River Agano* where the screen goes completely black followed by someone saying "the reel is finished!" and a laugh from everyone off-screen. Or, in *Memories of Agano*, in which Satō and cameraman Kobayashi are seen briefly talking about how to film a certain scene and how to get a certain light to make the shot more beautiful. Including small accidents and a certain reflexive quality in his works was also paired with the way Satō worked. Far from an omniscient director with a plan in mind and in complete control, Satō was more likely to give freedom and independence to his collaborators, directors of photography and editors first and foremost (even when they did not particularly want it). He had 'a combative spirit burning inside himself' (Kiyota 2016: 98) and liked to confront and get ideas not only from his crew, but also from the people in the film: the old man singing an incomprehensible song and laughing at the end of *Memories of Agano* was basically the result of a request from the man himself. The philosophical necessity of introducing the gaze of ***tasha*** ('the other') and the relation with otherness on film was a concept that not only shaped Satō's entire cinematic oeuvre, but also often surfaced in his writings and public speeches. As Mekas does in his best works, Satō used personal and diary film to deconstruct not only a certain idea of self-documentary as we have seen before, but also the idea of linear and monolithic personal memory and thus of a linear and monolithic subject. Satō seems to embrace a specific practice of the essay film as theorized by Timothy Corrigan:

> essayistic expressivity describes, more exactly I think, a subjection of an instrumental or expressive self to a public domain as a form of experience that continually tests and undoes the limits and capacities of that self through that experience (Corrigan 2011: 17).

It might be worthwhile noting that similar theoretical preoccupations, albeit with specific differences, are also prominently present in the writings and filmic practice of two giants of Japanese cinema. Ōshima Nagisa's 'Beyond Endless Self-Negation' (1993) and Yoshida Kijū's 'My Film Theory – The Logic of Self Negation' (2010) are two of the film-makers' most famous writings that provide a theoretical equivalent of their idea of cinema. Yoshida with his rejection of the director as an omniscient author and the will to transcend the figure of the filmmaker is very akin in spirit to Satō's approach and even more so in his insistence on the ontological opacity of the image

> [images] are only to be there an instant, in order to conceived new images and link infinitely, in order to be negated itself. But that is not all. Images do not tell anything. The only ones who can apply words to the images are the audience (Yoshida 2010: 17-18).

Yoshida and Satō thus view film and the image as a place that allows an encounter and an engagement with the alterity of the audience, but also with the otherness inherent in the artistic representation itself 'a ray of light, one sound, these all transcend the intention of the maker' (Yoshida 2010: 18).

By setting up the tarp and projecting *Living on River Agano* on it, and by overlapping Gochō's photos with the places where he may have wandered, Satō connects the memories of people with the geographical area where they originally lived. With this simple act Satō asserts the intrinsic nature of cinema: creating images and conjuring up phantasms. Connecting the act of remembering (often more a Bachelardian *rêverie* than a simple recollection) to a specific place and thus creating imaginative memory-scapes is one of the finest achievements in Satō's career. In these terms, it may be useful to compare his works to the approach of someone like Chris Marker, who articulated the infinite and problematic connection between memory and images throughout his entire career.[11] So deeply connected are images and memories that for Satō, the act of remembering should be treated and considered like a sort of experimental cinema, an idea not too far from what Marker states in *Sans Soleil* when he argues that '[images] have substituted themselves for my memory – they are my memory' (Marker 1983)

While it is true that the inspiration for the asynchronous use of sound and voiceover in *Memories of Agano* came from Marguerite Duras' *India Song* (1975), as Satō confessed at a screening event in 2004, it is also true that a major influence in this peculiar use of sound and voices can be attributed to the works of Trinh Minh-ha. I am referring here particularly to the famous lines of *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (1982): 'I do not intend to speak about/Just speak nearby' (Trinh 1992: 96), an approach towards the use of voices and oblique narration that Satō seems to have internalized and put into action, especially in the two films here discussed. The connections between the two Asian authors, however, are not limited to the sound element. Both share an evident common sensibility towards the image and politics of representation that runs throughout their entire filmic and theoretical bodies of work. The opening of one of Trinh's writings, for instance, in which she claims 'there's no such thing as documentary' (Trinh 1993: 90) deeply resonates with the countless times that Satō wrote about documentary as a form of fiction. Both authors are more interested in problematizing the word 'documentary' than using it to crystallize a definite meaning: in their reasoning, 'documentary' is more a starting point than a final destination. Therefore, Satō and Trinh's films both have a very strong element of self-reflexivity and a filmic construction that tries to blur and even eliminate the subjective–objective dichotomy. Realism and factuality in documentary are two concepts that both filmmakers profoundly battle, especially in a world where the digital revolution has brought to image-making a sense of immediacy and realism that is rarely questioned and is often taken as a given. Satō's critique of the Japanese personal documentary scene, as we have seen in the previous section, was also a way to refuse to accept a self-redundant documentary sealed from external interventions in which the individuality of the subject is rarely challenged. Similar concepts are also expressed by Trinh: 'selecting images of the so-called past that was caught on celluloid by others (or by myself), remains, very precisely a work of exteriority – a refusal to subsume the outside, the film or language reality, to the dimension of the inside and of an individual's interiority' (Trinh 2013: chap. 11). This work of exteriority is expressed in *Self and Others* and *Memories of Agano* by expanding one's own experi-

11. In the last part of his career, when experimenting with new technologies, Marker wrote "...when I proposed to transfer the regions of Memory into geographical rather than historical zones, I unwittingly linked up to a conception familiar to certain seventeenth-century minds, and totally foreign to the twentieth century" (Marker 1997).

ence and memory towards the outside, as we have seen, connecting them with landscape, places, things and everyday objects.

In a very short but complex proposal for a possible volume never published, written in August 2007, few months before his death,[12] Satō traces a genealogy of the beginnings of cinema and documentary, from the Lumière brothers to Georges Méliès and Robert Flaherty, to briefly touch on some problems about factuality and faking which surfaced in Japanese TV documentary programs a few years before. The point stressed by Satō is that even if reality is transposed frame by frame on film (or digitally), through the editing process, it inevitably turns into fiction. Moreover, he notes how in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) 'everything was a reproduction of customs and habits belonging to the past, therefore from the very beginning documentary has been fiction. The only difference is when this act of reproduction is condemned as "*yarase*" [staged performance sold as facts] or faithfully accepted as "*yatte itadaku*" [when the staged parts are acknowledged]' (Kiyota 2016: 295).

The idea of the volume was to use Kant, Husserl, Heidegger and other philosophers to sketch a theoretical apparatus through which to reconsider the history of cinema and criticize the faith in reality typical of documentary. Finally, interestingly, Satō chose to quote Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of bricolage. According to the French thinker, the concept, exclusive to the savage mind, was the ability to put pre-existing things together in new ways, which he contrasted with the engineer, i.e., the scientific western mind. However, Satō notes how new technologies, like digital video cameras, non-linear editing and the use of computers, are basically tools offering an opportunity for new generations to put into action a new kind of bricolage in filmmaking. Satō saw with the advent of digital a possible and desirable Copernican revolution through which the world of documentary could experience a paradigm shift of Kantian proportions: 'this new technological innovation will burst from inside the faith in reality of documentary (...). It is not too much to say that the world captured by the [digital] camera is the "phenomenal world of the subject" (Kiyota 2016: 297).

It is truly unfortunate that Satō was not able to fully experience and contribute to this new age of digital cinema, with all its problematics and possibilities. It would have been interesting to see what such a brilliant mind could have created and brought, both theoretically and on-screen, to the world of digital documentary.

Conclusion

I'd like to end this article with a short anecdote told by Satō's daughter.[13] When they used to bicycle in the mountains together when she was small, her father did not plan in advance where to go and how to come back: they used to start without any specific goal and, after they inevitably got lost, tried together to make their way back home. This anecdote perfectly sums up everything I have tried to demonstrate in this article, to understand Satō's attitude and approach towards cinema and documentary. Satō felt that film was an open project of a sort, to be shared with others, with a fresh start and an attitude of experiencing and exploring the world as if for the first time. The openness and opacity of his works are boundary-pushing qualities that resonate with many of the works produced worldwide by filmmakers, not only documentarians, around the globe today. His idea of documentary, a shifting and ever-changing territory in which to test the horizons and potentialities of cinema, is more relevant than ever and could benefit from a (re)discovery.

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12. Satō committed suicide on September 4, 2007 at the age of 49 after battling severe depression.

13. This anecdote was told by Kiyota Maiko at a Satō's retrospective held at the Kobe Planet Film Archive on April 29th 2016.

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Filmography

Aga ni ikiru/Living on the River Agano (1992) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Kobayashi Shigeru. Music: Kyoumaro. Sound: Suzuki Shoji. Editing: Satō Makoto. Format: 16mm, 115 min.

Wagaya no shusan nikki/Diary of Our Birth (1994) Director: Satō Makoto, Miyazaki Masao. Photography: Iwata Makiko. Production: TV Tokyo. Format: video, 45 min.

Otentosama ga hoshii/I Want the Sun (1995) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Watanabe Sho. Editing: Satō Makoto. Producer: Watanabe Sho. Format: 16mm, 47 min.

Chiisana koen no kodomotachi/Children at a Small Park (1995) Director: Satō Makoto. Format: video, 45 min.

Kitsunebi densetsu no machi Tsugawa/Tsugawa Town: Legend of the Will-o'-the-Wisp (1995) / 15min / Video /. Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Kobayashi Shigeru. Format: video, 15 min.

Shashin de yomu Tokyo/Reading Tokyo in Photographs (1996) Directo: Satō Makoto. Photography: Kobayashi Shigeru. Production: NHK. Producer: Daishima Haruhiko. Format: video, 90 min.

Niji no kakehashi: Daidokoro to nogyo e no nagai chosen/Rainbow Bridge: The Long Challenge of Local Independence Connecting Agriculture and the Kitchen (1996) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Matsune Hirotaka. Production: TV Tokyo. Format: video, 45 min.

Hoikuen no nichiyobi/Sunday at a Nursery School (1996) Director: Satō Makoto. Format: 16mm, 20 min.

Mahiru no hoshi/ Artists in Wonderland (1998) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Otsu Koshiro.Editing: Satō Makoto. Music: Inoue Yosui. Sound: Kubota Yukio. Production: Siglo. Producer: Yamagami Tetsujiro, Sho Koshiro. Format: 35/16mm, 93 min.

Megamisama kara no tegami/Letter from a Goddess (1999) Director: Satō Makoto. Format: 16mm, 30 min.

Self and Others (2000) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Tamura Masaki. Editing: Miyagi Shigeo. Music: Kyomaro. Sound: Kikuchi Nobuyuki. Production: Eurospace. Producer: Horikoshi Kenzo. Format: 16mm, 53 min.

Hanako (2001) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Otsu Koshiro. Editing: Hata Takeshi. Music: Imawano Kiyoshiro, Ruffy Tuffy. Sound: Tsurumaki Yutaka. Production: Siglo. Producer: Yamagami Tetsujiro. Format: 35mm, 60 min.

Hyogen to iu kairaku/The Pleasures of Expression (2001) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Otsu Koshiro. Production: Siglo. Format: video, 40 min.

Shijo saidai no sakusen/The Markets Greatest Strategy (2001) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Miyatake Yoshiaki. Production: Aomori Art Museum. Format: 16mm, 25 min.

Hoshino bunjin: Nojiri Hoei/Nojiri Hoei, Scholar of the Stars (2002) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Yanagida Yoshikazu. Sound: Takizawa Osamu. Production: Poluke. Format: video, 48 min.

Aga no kioku/Memories of Agano (2004) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Kobayashi Shigeru. Editing: Hata Takeshi. Sound: Kikuchi Nobuyuki. Music: Kyomaro. Producer: Yatabe Yoshihiko. Format: 16mm, 55 min.

Chūtō repotō: Arabu no hitobito kara mita jietai iraku hahei|The Japanese SDF Dispatch to Iraq Seen Through Arab Eyes (2004) Director: Satō Makoto. Production: Siglo. Format: video, 43 min.

Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said (2005) Director: Satō Makoto. Photography: Otsu Koshiro, Kurihara Akira, Satō Makoto. Editing: Hata Takeshi. Sound Editor: Tsurumaki Yutaka. Producer: Sasaki Masaaki, John Junkerman, Yamagami Tetsujiro. Format: 35mm, 137 min.

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