

Film  
Studies

# Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema

Volume 4 Number 1



## REVIEWS

### A SENSE OF HOME: BEYOND THE TRAGEDIES

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How can one speak in any way to a tragedy in which tens of thousands of lives were lost, and countless thousands poisoned from radiation emissions? The events of the Great East Japan Earthquake on 11 March 2011 changed our perspective; the omnibus film *A Sense of Home* is a response to that new perspective. Under the guidance of award-winning film-maker Kawase Naomi, her studio Kumie Inc., and the Nara International Film Festival, 21 film-makers from over ten countries contributed short films (3 minutes and 11 seconds each) to commemorate the 11 March triple tragedies in Japan (earthquake/tsunami/nuclear disaster). The connecting theme – a sense of home – is expressed variously as both *being* home and *searching for* home.

As someone who was in Japan on 11 March 2011, I felt a particular urgency to view *A Sense of Home*. Some of the short films resonated clearly with my memories of those stressful events, and with images I now felt compelled, and loathe, to revisit. Others of the short films in *A Sense of Home* were less connected to the 11 March event but rather addressed a sense of place in a broader context – the resilience and remembrance of a physical and mental *furusato*/hometown and (as stated in the introductory film statement) of ‘a collective imagination.’<sup>1</sup>

The film-makers who offered their artistry to this project stem from Argentina, Spain, Thailand, the PRC, France, Japan, the United States/Lithuania, the United States/Korea, Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia and Mexico. They represent a range of ages; five of the 21 film-makers are women. In alphabetical order they are: Bong Joon-ho, Catherine Cadou, Dodo Shunji, Víctor Erice, Pedro González-Rubio, Jia Zhang Ke, Kawase Naomi, Leslie Kee, So Yong Kim, Isaki Lacuesta, Jonas Mekas, Momoi Kaori, Nishinaka Takushi, Wisut Ponnimit, Mohd. Naguib Razak, Ariel Ritter, Steven Sebring, Patti Smith, Soda Kazuhiro,

1. An attractive booklet (on recycled paper) with black/white and colour illustrations accompanies the film. It includes a photo and biography of each film-maker (in English and Japanese), an artist’s statement, and still images from each film. It also includes notes of welcome from three international figures: financier Kumi Fujisawa (one of the ‘Young Global Leaders’), film festival director Luciano Barisone, and mountain climber/disaster relief leader Isamu Tatsuno.

2. *Kami shibai* is a form of entertainment, no longer readily available, in which stories are narrated through a series of illustrated placards. In this short film, the elderly men at the community centre bond together to perform part of the traditional story of 'Momotarō' (the legendary Peach Boy)

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Yamasaki Toyoko, and Zhao Ye. In this group are six Japanese directors, and several others with deep connections to Japan, such as Singaporean director Leslie Kee who has lived in Japan since 1993, and French director Catherine Cadou who is a translator from Japanese.

Reflecting on the theme of 'home', some of the directors decided to recall their childhood memories (Kawase, Ritter, Razak). Others speak of their parents' memories, or they consult old family photographs from decades past (Lacuesta, Dodo), while still others stress connections across the world via technology (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Mishimaki) or memories of what it felt like to return home after an absence (Zhao Ye).

Overall the focus is on the small and quotidian, on special communication within the home that separates it from the outside world. The filming is generally carried out within considerable silence, in the style of the visual poem. At times one hears a solo guitar, or (in Eric's contribution) a Japanese *shakuhachi* (a traditional reed instrument frequently associated with music of a profound nature). On the whole, the film-makers stay in the 'here and now', avoiding the temptation of retreating to parallel universes or to a sci-fi evocation of possible worlds.

Some film-makers decided to try to recreate the sensations of that day (Momoi, Nishinaka), and to evoke the thin line between life and death (Bong, in his film *Iki/Breath*). In Kee's haunting 'Hope of Light', multiple dissolves of buildings, once robust, now smashed like so many cardboard figures, remind us that this was the fourth largest earthquake in history whose devastation unleashed a mixture of Nature's force and human negligence.

A welcome respite from images of the destruction comes in 90-year-old Jonas Mekas's contribution. Mekas found an image of a spiritual home in a luminescent look at the landscape of Provence, evoking a sense of the 'ecstasy of being' that transcends the horrific. His swirling camera and luscious close-ups of Mediterranean harvests also mention the 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch walking through that landscape carrying a copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions* hand-written before the printing press was even invented.

The one animated sequence in this omnibus film (*Watering* by Thai animator Wisut Ponnimit) shows a small garden being carefully watered, and then left behind with regret, but with the awareness that the earth itself is our garden.

Home is also shown as the warm body of a lover in *Un momento en la tierra/A Moment on Earth*, González-Rubio), who shows the ocean returned to a peaceful state even as he ponders how all of our shelters will eventually crumble one day. And home can be found in new forms of family outside of traditional blood ties. In *Musubi/Ties*, Yamazaki introduces us to once-isolated elders who gather together and keep alive the pre-war art of *kami shibai*.<sup>2</sup> In *La Dunette*, Cadou offers us a glimpse of the quiet domesticity of home in her friends' artwork on the wall that 'watch us and inspire us'. Home is a place for healing as Jia Zhang Ke also illustrates in his film entitled *Alone Together*.

*Despedida/Farewell*, Isaki Lacuesta's contribution, is a moving tribute to a family, the director's own, as well as a depiction of the Ages of Man. The simplest of means – a wooded area, men of three ages (Isaki's nephew, brother and father, later joined by the director himself), offer overlapping studies in slow motion, like Ernest Trova's *Walking Man*. The men are nude, simply so, without any sense of self-consciousness or spectacle. The voice-over by Isaki's father reveals a painful memory from the years of dictatorship in Spain, and a pondering about the kinds of memories revealed just before death that tell us what has been our home.

Mohammed Razak's contribution offers one of the only sequences of an extended family gathered together around a table for meals, as his swirling camera lovingly records the wooden halls and exterior views of the house where he grew up, and where his son now explores. A child's need for a sense of her own space, a space she can control, is also the focus of So Yong Kim's gentle contribution that records scenes from her own family life in Berlin, often from a child's point of view. Her little daughter welcomes the new baby into her 'home' – a red cloth tent set-up in the living room. This calls to mind the first film in this series, Ariel Ritter's *Casa Futura/Future House*, where a group of children hold a rather erudite discussion as they try to figure out complex family relations, with parents, step-parents and 'uncles'. It also has echoes in Kawase Naomi's delicate concluding film that records several generations living harmoniously in the same space.

So Yong Kim was also one of the contributors to the recent 'Todas las Cartas' exhibition shown in Mexico City, Barcelona and Paris.<sup>3</sup> In this context I would like to also mention one of the short films in that collection, the final one Spanish director José Luis Guerín exchanged with Jonas Mekas. Guerín filmed a visit to the gravesite of the great Japanese director Ozu Yasujiro with its famous carving of the Chinese character *mu* (a Buddhist sense of nothingness). Guerín's camera focuses on the most mundane of objects – ants struggling to carry a twig up the stone face of the grave marker. The heroic labours of the toiling ants on the grave of the master are set against the sounds of the earthquake and the rising waves. Starting as an homage to Jonas Mekas, this *videocarta* talks of *el cineasta en una comunidad*/the filmmaker in a community and then becomes a revisiting of Guerín's earlier footage in Kita-Kamakura at Ozu's grave, while at the same time it serves as a tribute to the fortitude and generosity of the Japanese people now facing (as Guerín phrases it, and I concur) a 'severe nuclear threat'.

In Kita-Kamakura we first see middle-aged Japanese women working to maintain the cemetery (everyday women who seem to laugh to themselves at their sudden role as 'movie stars'). And then the film-maker shows us those tiny ants pulling and pushing together to finally hoist a twig five times their size, failing, trying again at another point of the wall, moving with a precise but unknown choreography. Even when the ants manage to get the twig to the top, it falls, although they themselves, fortunately, climb to safety. The camera trembles slightly as if in an earth tremor. Is this, perhaps, reminding us what a cosmic view might make of our relative size in the face of natural forces beyond our control? The final shot in the *videocarta* is of an abundance of *sake* bottles, flowers, and whiskey that admirers have placed before the grave, recalling how Ozu enjoyed his evening drink with friends after finishing a day of shooting. In the wake of the tragedies of 11 March, it is salutary to remember abundance, cooperation and scaling down.

Without the contributions of another Spanish director, Víctor Erice, and a US director Steven Sebring, the *A Sense of Home* collection would have been lacking in the direct recrimination that must accompany softer visions of the implications of 11 March 2011. As much as we might want to find comfort in distant and immediate visions of home, and in brave efforts at reconstruction and salvaging, a crucial portion of this historical event is the horror of the unnecessary, and poisonous, nuclear emissions. In Erice's *Ana, tres minutos/Ana, Three Minutes*, a seemingly minimalistic presentation of an actress (Ana Torrent) in her dressing room, gazing directly at the camera (us), actually contains an entire world of sharp reminders and warnings not to

3. For additional information about that exhibition, see my essay 'Todas las cartas ("All The Letters"): An Invitation' in *Senses of Cinema*: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/toda-las-cartas-%E2%80%99Call-the-letters%E2%80%99D-an-invitation/> The multi-region DVD package of most of the *videocartas* from the exhibition can be purchased through the website of *Intermedio*: [http://www.intermedio.net/tienda\\_dvd/](http://www.intermedio.net/tienda_dvd/)

ignore the yet-unresolved nuclear crisis in Japan (affecting the entire world). With the date of 6 August on Ana's laptop screen (a frame within a frame), Erice reminds that the country where the bombs fell 66 years ago is foolish to build nuclear reactors in seismic areas. Lighting three memorial candles, Ana leaves us with the statement that she cannot help but feel that our ancestors are watching us. As our voice of truth, Ana is still gazing at monsters as she did almost 40 years earlier in the monumental Erice film *El espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* starring the child Ana Torrent.

And in the filming of rock musician/activist Patti Smith's incantatory song/poem 'The People Have the Power' (read by the poet and filmed by Sebring), we are told in no hesitant terms that we, the people, must remember our strength and face difficult truths. Patti Smith implores us to partake of the 'shining valleys' with 'senses newly opened', because (repeated over and over) 'the people have the power to redeem the work of fools'. On YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zva9mnZCrWU>) one can find her singing a version of these lyrics (accompanied by music video images) from years past, but this stripped-down recited version in *A Sense of Home* is even more unforgettable. Once you have heard it, the rhythm and weight of the words will never leave your mind. Privileging word over image, the Erice and Sebring/Smith short films exhort the viewer to see clearly past official lies.

And so the earthquake becomes a huge rupture in our lives. Watching *A Sense of Home*, I am reminded how often I wish we could wake up and find it was all a bad dream. But alas, a cloud of radioactive substances rises upwards and is dissolved invisibly into the water system of a great metropolis like some B-grade catastrophe movie. But this movie has endless reels and the projectionist is not sure how to control the machine.

*A Sense of Home*. Indeed it is when artists pool together their efforts for the greater good. Carried in, generations down. Still images (water-soaked photos), some old super-8 footage. Some everyday yet restorative images. The films show us what we see when we lift up a corner of the curtain. Behind it we find images of pure and troubled waters. Nature's benevolence, nature's threats. Images of disciplined, if anxious, attempts to connect after the devastation. This collection of short films is at once comforting, disturbing and revelatory.

The idea for *A Sense of Home* is an inspired one. We can turn again and again to these cinematic prose poems with a feeling of encouragement. I hope this review will help readers bring this film to their respective communities; proceeds from the screening fee go to the reconstruction efforts in the Tohoku region. As Fujisawa notes, these films are 'a step forward, even if it's a small step'. And as coordinator/film-maker Kawase's final short in this project reminds us, we are only 'passing through life'.