

The Selection Process for Yamagata

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“It would be a perfect opportunity to be freed from the stereotyping of documentary and get an idea of how versatile documentary films can be.” It was 1988 and I was intrigued by a proposal by Mr. Yano Kazuyuki, who works at the Tokyo Office of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. So I decided to take part in the selection for the International Competition of YIDFF. And a quarter-century has passed before I knew it.

The selection process has assumed greater significance and brought greater pleasure to me with each edition of the festival. So much so that it almost became my life's work. I can only be thankful to Mr. Yano for his initial invitation to this role.

It is indeed physically demanding work to watch vast numbers of films once every two years. And yet it brings with it the sense of fulfillment and spiritual reward. I literally have learned about the world through all those films.

Looking back, ever since 1989, when the first edition of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival was held, through to present times, the world has gone through one turbulent time after another. We had the collapse of the Berlin

Wall, the Gulf War, the Yugoslavian Civil War, 9-11, the War in Afghanistan and the Iraq War. We had natural catastrophes in Taiwan, China, and East Japan. The world gets more and more confused and is constantly changing at a breakneck pace.

Filmmakers face a challenge of sublimating the world they observe after processing their subjects in their own way, while clarifying their own unique viewpoints. The films taught me that it was possible to depict the same exact event in many different ways depending on where a given filmmaker stands. Most of the films sent for application were the polar opposite of neutrality and fairness in their attitude. On the contrary, the filmmakers would dissect the world through their eyes and embed their own “truth” in their films. That is what fascinates me the most. I was fortunate enough to encounter works by such masters as Robert Kramer, Errol Morris, and Frederick Wiseman through the selection process for Yamagata. It was not only my eyes toward documentary film that opened up by working on this process. It was my eyes toward the world in general.

So how exactly is the selection process initiated?

Like most other film festivals, films in competition are selected by 10 or so members of the selection committee. In recent years, we have up to 1,000 films applying for the selection, and it is virtually impossible for one member to go through all of them in the limited amount of time we have, which is only six months. So all the films are divided and allocated to each member, who come up with their recommendations. We would discuss together thereafter. The lineup of the committee is not permanent, and yet it is always filled with unique individuals. Naturally selection meetings can turn into heated debates and can be very thrilling. However, there has been one film which was selected unanimously on the spot.

The film was *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*. It was a film that made all the selection committee members intoxicated with joy and a sense of achievement after completing its whopping 9-hour marathon screening. If you watched the film, you would know how we felt.

At the time of writing, the selection for 2013 competition has been completed. But I am thinking of taking time to watch films that were not recommended for official competition. My objective for the future? To keep watching various types of documentary as much as possible for the rest of my life. (Translated by Usui Naoyuki)