

I Chose Works that Had “Something” About Them

An Interview with Ogawa Naoto (Coordinator of the Program “Cinema with Us 2013”)

The Great East Japan Earthquake hit on March 11, 2011. The same year, we hastily put together the Cinema with Us program for the festival in October. This time again, about two years later, we have collected movies related to the disaster in the Cinema with Us 2013 program.

The festival office asked me if we could continue Cinema with Us, this time not merely as a collection of visual records, but as a program of “movies.” I watched about 150 works and was astonished to find most of them to be much more conventional than I had expected. One reason might be that compared to last time there is less footage that is expressive merely as a record of events. As a result, people have been much more thorough first in data gathering, and then in organizing their footage into works with an explicit point of view. Leaving aside whether the views are right or wrong, the works themselves end up seeming inevitably clichéd. Considering how much variety I had expected to see among the people actually living their lives in the areas affected by the disaster, I was truly surprised to see this perceived obligation to fit everything into a certain kind of movie, expressing certain opinions. I didn’t want to make it a program composed just of movies making obviously legitimate arguments, and so you’ll find that my selection this time wanders a bit away from that trend.

For example, in *Dance of Reincarnation; Performed by Kesenuma High School Students* by Miyamori Yosuke, there’s certainly a degree to which we might only see it as showing the silly patter of school girls. But many different kinds of people have been afflicted by the disaster. Among them there of course are kids like this devoted to their school clubs, having fun with their friends despite whatever else they might have experienced. This work was chosen not just to show a bright story in a terrible situation, but because there is diversity and wealth in documentary expression. We don’t have to just show people depressed and struggling.

In a slightly different vein is *A Man Who Returned — The Dis-*

tance to Happiness, from Tokyo to Fukushima by Takeuchi Masatoshi, about the woes of a middle-aged man. I think there are many people who can’t help but vaguely laugh at things like the life they’ve planned, their work, family, and friends. A person’s life is not only full of drama, with weeping and rage, or gleefully accomplishing things. Most people don’t live like that. This might seem like a trivial topic for the subject of a documentary, but I think it is one more important thing documentary should deal with.

This time, choosing 15 works to show was extremely difficult. All I can say is that they weren’t chosen for being accurate or expressing the “right” opinion, but for having something in particular about them that interested me. Certainly that kind of documentary is one way of confronting the disaster. An aspect of documentary can involve getting close to a subject in the minority, and there are things that only people directly affected by the disaster can feel. But I think it is fine for people to set these aside, merely confronting the films as films. Focusing only on victims can even be seen as exclusionary.

Not only that, we may find in ten years new things to say or ways of looking at what has gone on. Just as we find looking back at past iterations of Yamagata and even today, there are works made about political incidents and historical events in Asia years after the fact. I don’t know when things will settle down in Japan, but it might take that long for people to take a moment and express something through cinema. We have already begun planning and aiming to continue the project. There’s nothing to do but hope for, bet on its continuation. Yamagata has imposed this job on itself; the process begins with simply feeling our way forward.

Interview conducted by Okuyama Shinichiro (Editorial Board)
in Sendai on September 8, 2013
(Translated by Jeremy Harley)

— Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival is planning an archive of films chronicling with the disaster.