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Record. Reenact. Recycle. Notes on Shindō Kaneto's Documentary Styles

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Abstract: In his work, the filmmaker Shindō Kaneto sought to employ various, often seemingly incongruous, cinematic styles that complicate the notions of fiction and documentary film. This paper first examines his 'semi-documentary' films that often deal with the everyday life of common people by means of an enhanced realist approach. Second, attention is paid to the fusion of documentary and drama when reenacting historical events, as well as the subsequent recycling of these images in a 'quasi-documentary' fashion. Finally, I uncover a trend towards 'meta-documentary' that takes issue with the act of filmmaking itself. I argue that Shindō's often self-referential work challenges the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction while engaging in a self-reflective criticism of cinema as a medium.

Keywords: authorship; documentary film; hibakusha; Japanese cinema; Mizoguchi Kenji; non-fiction; semi-documentary; Shindō Kaneto

1. Introduction

An already established screenwriter, Shindō Kaneto (1912–2012) spent most of the 1950s struggling to make his name as a film director. After debuting with the autobiographical *Story of a Beloved Wife* (Aisai monogatari, 1951), he mostly worked as an independent, with brief stints of being hired by major studios. An amalgam of melodrama and social realism that soon became a defining feature of his works puzzled critics and it was not until the experimental semi-documentary, *The Naked Island* (Hadaka no shima, 1960), that he was able to gain a reputation for directing. Although this trend became clearer in his later work, from early on, Shindō sought ways to mix fiction and documentary styles, recording as well as reenacting, especially when making films based on true events.

In his influential study on 1950s Japan, Toba Kōji characterized it as the age of *kiroku* (record, document). Toba (2010, p. 9) points out five closely related cultural phenomena that were part of the 'kiroku boom': amateur writing about everyday life, news reportage, documentary film, photography and *kamishibai* shows. This was also when young filmmakers such as Hani Susumu (1928) and Tsuchimoto Noriaki (1928–2008) joined Iwanami Productions (Iwanami Eiga), a major vessel for subsequent developments in Japanese documentary film. It is against this background that Shindō began his long directing career that comprises both fiction and non-fiction works. The aim of this paper is to examine how and why Shindō employed a variety of documentary styles in his films, whether it was for attaining heightened realism, forging and reusing images of historical events, or pursuing a (self-)critique of the act of recording and reporting in visual media.

2. Semi-Documentary

In *Kiroku eigaron* (On Documentary Film, 1940), one of the first studies on the subject in Japan, the seminal film theorist, Imamura Taihei, discusses and provides examples on how documentary

style is beginning to emerge in Japanese cinema. 'What can be found . . . is the stripping of the usual fictional [*kakōteki*] elements and simple but deep-rooted yearning *towards documentary film.* (Imamura 1940, p. 43)' He singles out recent works by major directors such as Kumagai Hisatora, Shimazu Yasujirō, Shimizu Hiroshi, Tasaka Tomotaka and Uchida Tomu. Imamura pays particular attention to the latter's *A Thousand and One Nights in Tokyo* (Tōkyō sen'ichiya, 1938).

> Uchida Tomu shoots the movements of a gravel-collecting machine for an almost involuntarily long time. The actors are looking at the machine from a far-away riverbank. People looking at a machine from afar are actors who have retreated from being in front of the camera. Along with the final scene depicting gymnastics, here is clearly a strong dislike towards drama. Also, the film's plot is entirely devoid of necessity. This is an expression of resistance to story, stage drama and fiction. (Imamura 1940, p. 43, author's translation)

I have previously examined (Kitsnik 2018) how the over-long and repetitive sequences in Shindō's *The Naked Island* relate to earlier works such as Uchida's next film, *Earth* (Tsuchi, 1939), shot over a period of one year and simultaneously to *A Thousand and One Nights in Tokyo.* Shindō's first substantial assignment as a screenwriter had actually been with the elder director, although the project that included taking a trip to Manchuria and going through a number of rewrites ultimately came to nothing. However, Shindō's employment of long scenes of repeated gestures that continued to the point of meaninglessness should be considered as a defining feature of his work and this 'semi-documentary' style can be delineated to the trend Imamura is describing in prewar Japanese cinema. Perhaps the most notorious example of this approach can be encountered at the beginning of *The Naked Island* (See Figure 1), where a peasant couple (Otowa Nobuko and Tonoyama Taiji) living on a small island without a clear water source is repeatedly going through the slow and tedious process of carrying buckets up a steep slope in order to water sweet potato plants at the summit.



Figure 1. *The Naked Island* (Shindō Kaneto, 1960).

Physical labor and its representation through the images of routinely repeated gestures can be seen in almost all of Shindō's films. In *Mother* (Haha, 1963) (See Figure 2), a middle-aged couple, once again played by Otowa and Tonoyama, runs a small printing house in Hiroshima. Their everyday chores include operating a number of machines in the shack and then delivering the product in a shabby three-wheeled van. In summer heat, their perspiring bodies are caught by the black-and-white camera as suggestively as in *The Naked Island*. In the autobiographical *Tree Without Leaves* (Rakuyōju, 1986) the whole peasant family (in contrast to *The Naked Island*, a wealthy one) is engaged in various acts of

processing agricultural products (See Figure 3). Their New Year's Eve is spent preparing rice cakes (mochi), whereby cooked rice is pounded into paste and then molded into smaller buns. This takes place in a large open space of the family house, with all members except the patriarch participating. When autumn comes, we find them sitting in the same room, peeling one basket of persimmons after another. Approaching ethnofiction, these images present both the livelihood of the family and the way community is created, while always hinting at the seasonal pattern and ritualistic character of the activities.



Figure 2. *Mother* (Shindō Kaneto, 1963).



Figure 3. *Tree Without Leaves* (Shindō Kaneto, 1986).

At the level of narration, this manner of presenting repeating gestures goes well beyond the length conventionally allowed for establishing shots in fiction films. In other words, what is anticipated to be an exposition instead ends up taking on something akin to the function of mise en scène. By drawing attention to the everyday activities, rather than using them for establishing characters and situations, these sequences seem to provide a statement on how the routine of labor creates meaning to the everyday lives and hardships of common people. In the last scenes of Shindō's final film, *A Postcard* (Ichimai no hagaki, 2011) (See Figure 4), another couple (ōtake Shinobu and Toyokawa Etsushi),

much like the one in *The Naked Island*, is shown carrying water on yokes to start anew and cultivate the land left behind by a disintegrated peasant family during the last months of the war. In this poignant allusion to what is perhaps his most enduring directorial work, Shindō reconfirms his most persistent metaphor on human existence in a characteristically self-referential manner.

Satō (2006, p. 147) has pointed out that, descended from an impoverished agricultural family, Shindō maintained the mindset he inherited from there for his entire career as a filmmaker. Indeed, many of his films are directly related to depicting the plight of agricultural workers. Interestingly, the very first record of Shindō's writing, an unproduced screenplay he entered in a competition by the journal *Eiga hyōron* (Film Criticism), *Farmers Who Lost Their Land* (Tsuchi o ushinatta hyakushō, 1937), tells the story of a village that is about to be flooded by land developers to make way for a new water supply for the rapidly growing city of Tokyo. It was based on the real-life case of Ogouchi Village that was gaining much attention in the press at the time. Ōya Sōichi, a prominent non-fiction writer, published a well-known reportage in *Chūō Kōrōn* in August 1937 and the Akutagawa prize-winning novelist Ishikawa Tatsuzō fictionalized it in *Hikage no mura* (Village Under a Shadow, 1937) (Takeda 2017, pp. 9–10). There was even a hit song, *Kotei no furusato* (Home Village at the Bottom of a Lake), performed by the popular singer Shōji Tarō. At any rate, this site caught the popular imagination, as well as that of various writers leaning towards documentary style.



Figure 4. *A Postcard* (Shindō Kaneto, 2011).

Shindō went to Ogouchi on what he calls 'scenario hunting' as early as summer 1936. He later wrote that despite taking extensive walks there, he had no interest in finding about the real life of the village—simply seeing it was enough for him to construct drama necessary for his screenplay (Shindō 1993, p. 73). This statement at once reveals Shindō's complex and paradoxical attitude towards documentary filmmaking. Shindō discloses his view on documentary more precisely in a short essay, 'The documenting nature of film' (Eiga no kirokusei, 1962), where he posits that the term 'non-fiction' is basically meaningless due to the involvement of the author (*sakka*), deeming any film fictional by default (Shindō 1981, p. 47). By claiming so, Shindō underlines how the viewpoint of the author interrupts and complicates the proposed actuality of any cinematic text. In the following sections,

I will examine how Shindō has woven this understanding into the film texts themselves in various ways, both by enmeshing different cinematic modes of representation and inscribing his own presence as the filmmaker.

3. Quasi-Documentary

In his fiction films, Shindō pursued a semi-documentary style that enabled him to depict the everyday with heightened realism. Examining how Shindō approached the representation of intense and controversial historic events reveals yet another layer of his engagement with documentary film. (In)famously, a number of his works, such as *Children of Hiroshima* (Genbaku no ko, 1952) and *Sakuratai 8.6* (Sakuratai chiru, 1988), relate to the atomic bombings of his hometown, Hiroshima. Another film, *Lucky Dragon No. 5* (Daigo fukuryūmaru, 1959), is about the crew of the eponymous fishing vessel that was exposed to atomic fallout from nuclear testing. In these films, Shindo alternates documentary footage with reenacted sequences, which makes them semi-documentaries in the most literal sense, as well as enabling their retrospective labelling as docudrama or docufiction.

The passage from *Children of Hiroshima* (1952) that recreates the atomic explosion and its immediate aftermath with a Soviet montage influence, highly stylized shots of blood-mired and disfigured bodies, is certainly the most renowned and discussed one of Shindō's many versions of the disastrous event. A frame story about a teacher (Otowa) who visits the city in order to find her students and their families leads to a flashback when she is standing next to the A-Bomb Dome. Accompanied by the premonitory ticking of clocks, the city symphony-like calm and relaxed images of the everyday life of Hiroshima and its citizens suddenly transforms into a series of scenes which, in their pace and visceral horror, are reminiscent of the Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potyomkin, 1925, Sergei Eisenstein) (See Figure 5). The closeup of the hand of a clock that hits 8.15 acts as a trigger for the transition from one mode to the other.



Figure 5. *Children of Hiroshima* (Shindō Kaneto, 1952).

Shindō revisited the events of these August days decades later in *Sakuratai 8.6*, which focuses on the eponymous travelling theatre troupe unlucky to have been performing in Hiroshima on that fateful day. In this part-documentary film, a series of interviews with the victims' colleagues and friends (most of them notable Japanese actors) are effortlessly alternated and juxtaposed with reenacted footage of the attack and its consequences, including the painful deaths of the two prominent members of Sakuratai, Maruyama Sadao (1901–1945) and Sonoi Keiko (1913–1945), on 16 and 21 August 1945,

respectively. Besides documentary footage of various radiation victims, there is also a scene from *The Rickshaw Man* (Muhōmatsu no isshō, 1943, Inagaki Hiroshi) in which Sonoi had starred. In contrast to the interviews shot in color, the reenacted scenes are presented in a markedly grainy black and white cinematography, having the appearance of Japanese films from a few decades earlier.

The scene in *Sakuratai 8.6* where several people who have survived the explosion are making an effort to crawl clear from the rubble and help each other is presented in a much more realist style than the montage sequence in *Children of Hiroshima*, which has sometimes been criticized for its emotional detachment. Curiously, parts of the sequence, such as children playing in water, a baby crawling over the floor and a withering sunflower, are borrowed from the earlier film, in effect recycling one reenactment alongside the new one. Something similar happens in *A Postcard*, where the final stages of the war are represented by a brief passage with the same clock, treated as if already a form of documentary footage (See Figure 6). This is the point where semi-documentary at the same time becomes quasi-documentary that mixes ready-made 'documentary' footage with Shindō's new 'semi-documentary' passages. Ostensibly, this is also done out of convenience because the director can use whatever is readily available in his personal archive.



Figure 6. *Children of Hiroshima* (Shindō Kaneto, 1952); *A Postcard* (Shindō Kaneto, 2011).

Another example from *Sakuratai 8.6* that is even more telling of Shindō's self-conscious play with the cinematic medium shows a search party, two men in uniforms, entering a large building, one of the few still erect after the catastrophe. As they walk in, the camera pans to reveal film lighting equipment as well as a huge canvas with a life-size photo of the destroyed cityscape of Hiroshima standing against the wall (See Figure 7). The ensuing action then takes place in a stage play fashion, employing the photo as backcloth. By underlining artificiality and providing yet another mode of representation enmeshed with theatre that makes the film medium itself literally visible, Shindō points at the inevitability of staging in cinema and the impossibility of non-fiction.



Figure 7. *Sakuratai 8.6* (Shindō Kaneto, 1988).

Whereas human figures on the verge of disintegration surely allow for some striking cinematic images, the depiction of the consequences of the atomic bomb has never been the only device for Shindō when commenting on the main trauma of his generation, the Pacific War. There is also a much more intimate and subdued image that he has relied on (and recycled) in a number of films. In *The Story of a Beloved Wife* (1951), while the Shindō-like protagonist (Uno Jūkichi) is trying to finish his final draft of a script, people have gathered outside on the street to wave flags and sing songs to bid farewell to a young man from the neighborhood who has received his conscription orders. 'Banzai' is shouted but the general mood is somber. A few scenes later, heavy rain is falling on the same street while there is a silent funeral parade for the young soldier who has returned home in a small white wooden box carried by his mother.

A somewhat more light-hearted and humorous as well as explicitly political use of the same motif can be found in *The Strange Story of Oyuki* (Bokutō kidan, 1992). This time, the singing and hoorays are conducted by the prostitutes living in the Tamanoi red-light district, contrasted with documentary footage of the prime minister Tōjō Hideki on a military parade greeting schoolboys who have joined the army (See Figure 8). Shindō revisited this motif once more in *A Postcard*, again in an ironic vein, with a hint of black humor. The elder son of a peasant family receives his orders and is given a farewell ceremony in front of the family house. In the next scene, the same people walk into the same frame, this time in silence and carrying a small wooden box containing the soldier's bones. Not before long, the younger brother is also drafted, and all the rituals are repeated in an identical manner, frame by frame. Shindō is repeating a common trope of wartime cinema with a critical distance by establishing a stark contrast between the clamorous farewell paid to the soldier and the silent homecoming of his remains.



Figure 8. *The Strange Story of Oyuki* (Shindō Kaneto, 1992).

A Postcard takes as its premise Shindō's own real-life experience of spending the last days of the war in cleaning duty while the rest of his unit was killed in combat. However, this is not the only occasion when he has linked his own life with cinema and seminal events in modern Japanese history. Shindō's two-volume *History of Japanese Scenario* (*Nihon shinarioshi*, (Shindō 1989)) is organized along time frames that seem to overlap conspicuously with that of his own life and involvement in the film industry. The book starts with the infamous Zigomar incident in 1912, the year Shindō was born and the blurb on the cover of the book ambiguously characterizes it as 'the first autobiography of/in Japanese film' (Nihon eiga no hajimete no jijoden). Among comparable attempts at the historiography of Japanese cinema, it bears close affinity to ōshima Nagisa's documentary, *100 Years of Japanese Cinema* (1995), with its often criticized gesture to include most of the director's own films within the survey up to the point when they seem to be structuring the entire history. In the final section, I will examine how Shindō, in those works more readily classifiable as documentaries, often actively infiltrates and interrupts the very text by inscribing himself as the author of the film.

4. Meta-Documentary

Arguably Shindō's most solid achievement as a documentary filmmaker is the feature he made about his one-time mentor, Mizoguchi Kenji (1898–1956). Shot over many years during various other projects, *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director* (Aru kantoku no shōgai: Mizoguchi Kenji no kiroku, 1975) was very well received upon its release and placed first in the annual *Kinema junpō*'s critics' poll—the first such distinction for Shindō (he won again with *A Postcard* in 2011). Notably, the word *kiroku* is used in the film's original title as if to suggest that, this time, Shindō has finally managed to simply 'record' without relying on reenactments. Compared to the films previously discussed, the approach is indeed more straight-forward and mostly operates within the genre conventions of documentary film.

It is evident from *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director* that Shindō reveres Mizoguchi but, at the same time, seems all too eager to expose the man behind the camera with all his human flaws. The film is structured around a string of interviews conducted with an impressive lineup of Mizoguchi's collaborators, often shot with the interviewer's shoulder visible, making Shindō's authorial presence ubiquitous (Figure 9). As an interviewer, Shindō emerges as a relentless interrogator, persistently forcing his witnesses to give away ground. For instance, he is teasing out testimonies from the actresses who had problematic relationships with Mizoguchi, such as Irie Takako (1911–1995)

and, notably, Tanaka Kinuyo (1909–1977). Towards the end of the film, Shindō keeps pushing Tanaka towards a confession she probably would not even be able to make about the exact nature of her relationship with Mizoguchi. Shindō used material from this interview for writing *Tanaka Kinuyo: The Novel* (Shōsetsu Tanaka Kinuyo, 1983), subsequently made it into the film *An Actress* (Joyū, 1987) by Ichikawa Kon, where scenes from various films are reenacted with Yoshinaga Sayuri as Tanaka.



Figure 9. *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director* (Shindō Kaneto, 1975).

Shindō appears again as an interviewer in *A Paean* (Sanka, 1972), shot around the same time as *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director*. However, this film is an adaptation of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's short story, *A Portrait of Shunkin* (Shunkinshō, 1933), and the director is made part of the multilayered fictional world of the original plot that comprises various conflicting sources telling the same story of the blind *koto* teacher, Shunkin, and her faithful servant, Sasuke. In a sequence where the author (Shindō) is interviewing Shunkin's maid Teru (Otowa), the shot/reverse shot technique suddenly reveals blood gushing from the edge of his mouth (See Figure 10). By way of a wry commentary on his own work as a filmmaker, Shindō seems to be alluding to the complexities of this role that never comes without strong authorial investment or violence inflicted upon its subject.



Figure 10. *A Paean* (Shindō Kaneto, 1972).

Elsewhere (Kitsnik 2018), I have argued that Shindō's voice and physical features that appear to belong to a rural laborer become the site of authenticity that supports the perception of his films as semi-documentaries. In the examples above, by bringing the documentarist to the screen, not unlike fellow filmmakers Werner Herzog, Nick Broomfield or Michael Moore, Shindō also takes a step from self-reference to self-reflexion and, by so doing, moves towards what could be called meta-documentary. In Japan, Shindō was not alone in positioning himself as an unreliable author: suffice to think of Imamura Shōhei's screen role in his *A Man Vanishes* (Ningen jōhatsu, 1967). Paradoxically, it seems

that the more Shindō approaches documentary film proper, the more the focus shifts to the author and the agency of filmmaking.

Although very much invested in trying out various documentary styles, Shindō displays a (self-)critical stance towards the act of recording. In fact, one of Shindō's thematic preoccupations is the role he assigns to media reporting, both as part of film's context and narrative device. A characteristic example of this can be found in *Live Today, Die Tomorrow!* (Hadaka no jūkyūsai, 1970), a film based on the life and crimes of the spree killer (and later novelist) Nagayama Norio, named Yamada Michio in the film. After newspaper headlines report Yamada's capture, his mother, Take (Otowa), led by a police officer, is shown getting off a train. The platform is swarmed with news reporters and photographers who all try to get a hold of her for any comment about her son's past. In order to do so, they run in flocks over the tracks, climb over fences and follow her down the stairs to the waiting lobby. All this is captured by a violently shaking hand-held camera that adds both intensity and a documentary feel to the sequence. The mother, looking very tired, is eventually cornered by the members of the press and pushed against a wall. A montage of closeups from different angles shows the mother closing her eyes and fainting, while the camera lights keep flashing over her pale face (See Figure 11). The homicidal acts committed by Yamada at once become thematized alongside the violent behavior of the press craving to report them.



Figure 11. *Live Today, Die Tomorrow!* (Shindō Kaneto, 1970).

When making films on factual material such as *Live Today, Die Tomorrow!* or *Lucky Dragon No. 5*, Shindō includes the way these events were witnessed and reported at the time, turning media coverage into a crucial part of the film's narration. By so doing, Shindō reveals an affinity with the work of fellow filmmakers such as Matsumoto Toshio (1932–2017) and Ōshima Nagisa (1932–2013) who, in addition to working with both fiction and documentary, often employed topical issues and their media representation in their films. In *Lucky Dragon No. 5*, it is through the gradual uncovering of the evidence by the press that we first find out about the consequences of what occurred to the ship crew exposed to nuclear fallout near Bikini Atoll in 1954 and, upon reading a newspaper, so does the crew (See Figure 12). After the ship's captain (Uno) is taken to a hospital in Tokyo for treatment, we receive information about the changes in his medical condition by scenes that cross-cut between his hospital room and reports on the radio. When his health suddenly deteriorates, the bed is surrounded by doctors while the reporters wait at the staircase; when the patient's wife arrives at the hospital, she is followed by a crowd of reporters. When the captain regains consciousness, this information is once again transmitted by the image of a reporter running up the stairs and telling his colleagues about it; later, when he finally succumbs to the radiation disease, radio is the first to make the announcement.



Figure 12. *Lucky Dragon No. 5* (Shindō Kaneto, 1959).

By making the act of reporting such a visible presence on the screen, Shindō is in fact making an inquiry into media ethics. In the case of *Lucky Dragon No. 5*, it could be argued that the press was working within the confines of public interest. After all, it was the first to bring the devastating facts of nuclear fallout encountered by the fishing crew to the attention of the public. However, its treatment of the captain's struggle for his life, although clearly sympathetic to the victim and his family, contains clear hints of sensationalism. The latter tendency becomes much more evident in films such as *Live Today, Die Tomorrow!* and *The Strange Story of Oyuki*. In the latter, an adaptation of Nagai Kafū's (1879–1955) *A Strange Tale from the East of the River* (Bokutō Kidan, 1937), the timeline of this semi-autobiographical story is extended all the way to Kafū's (Tsugawa Masahiko) death. The famous last photograph taken by the yellow press, where the already deceased Kafū is discovered face down on the floor of his room, is reenacted in meticulous detail (See Figure 13). In contrast, *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director* begins with Shindō entering the Kyoto hospital where Mizoguchi died, after which the picture of the walking director abruptly halts while the soundtrack goes on and provides a conversation with a hospital staff member who will not grant the crew admission to the premises. By way of compromise, Shindō agrees to simply shoot a scene of the empty corridor.



Figure 13. *The Strange Story of Oyuki* (Shindō Kaneto, 1992).

5. Conclusions

From early on in his long career, Shindō Kaneto displayed a strong interest in working with material based on real-life events and employing a variety of documentary film styles. This preoccupation can be traced from his first screenplay all the way to his final film, between which Shindō was invested in reproducing both the quiet drama of the everyday as well as controversial historical events. At the same time, Shindō expressed an awareness of the limitations of the cinematic medium, where the authorial position necessarily overrides any attempt of objective recording, rendering the notion of non-fiction all but meaningless. Equipped with this understanding, Shindō often mixed fiction and documentary styles in his films, whether reenacting events in a highly stylized manner or recycling the resulting footage in his own subsequent work. It could be argued that this propensity to challenge and blur the boundaries between different modes of representation was one of the causes for the inconsistency of his directorial career that, in various ways, sought to answer the dilemma of how to create drama by recording social reality.

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