



LABORATORY X Inc. presents

THE CATS OF GOKOGU SHRINE
五香宮の猫 Gokogu no Neko
Observational Film #10



Original Title: Gokogu no Neko

JAPAN – USA | Color | Japanese | 119' | DCP

DIRECTED, PRODUCED, SHOT, and EDITED by Kazuhiro SODA

PRODUCED by Kiyoko KASHIWAGI

INTERNATIONAL SALES: ASIAN SHADOWS



SYNOPSIS

Gokogu is a small, ancient Shinto shrine in Ushimado, Japan. Home to dozens of street cats, it is also known as Cat Shrine. Many people visit the shrine for various reasons: some to worship gods, others to enjoy gardening. Some people come to clean the shrine as volunteers while others just stop by on their way to fish Japanese sardinella — and it is the perfect place for kids to play after school. It is a heaven for cat-loving residents and visitors too. Some people visit Gokogu to feed the freely roaming stray cats. Others just come to see these cats or to take pictures of them. But some residents complain about the waste the cats leave around the neighbourhood. Gokogu looks peaceful on the surface, but it is also the epicentre of a sensitive issue that divides the local community.



Master Soda started rolling his camera to observe and depict the aging, traditional community and its spiritual centre Gokogu. The result is a beautiful and harsh, simple yet complex portrayal of the universe of Gokogu, interwoven with people, cats, and all living beings.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

By Kazuhiro Soda

By a turn of fate and coincidences, we ended up shooting *Oyster Factory* (2015) and *Inland Sea* (2018) in Ushimado by the Seto Inland Sea in Japan. Back then, Kiyoko Kashiwagi, my wife and producer, and I were comfortable living in New York, and never dreamt that we would move to Ushimado in a few years.

But the coronavirus pandemic profoundly changed our attitude towards life. In 2021, after 27 years in New York, we relocated to Ushimado. We didn't want to continue living in a big city covered in concrete, so disconnected from nature. Instead, we wanted to try living in harmony with nature, surrounded by the sea and mountains. A little while after we settled in Ushimado, the shooting of *The Cats of Gokogu Shrine* began unexpectedly.



Kiyoko and I encountered two cat brothers, Chataro and Chibishima, on the street. They were injured and starving, so we felt compelled to look after them with the help of a local activist who had been feeding and protecting Ushimado's local street cats. In return, Kiyoko volunteered to help him capture and fix the cats of Gokogu, which made me start rolling my camera.

While shooting at Gokogu, I discovered that the shrine was a unique public space where many people came and went for various reasons. I also became aware that while there were people who took care of the street cats, some residents harbored negative feelings toward them because of the mess their waste left in the neighborhood. Gokogu seemed to be the epicenter of a sensitive issue that divided the local community. Drawn in by the allure of the place, I found myself shooting at Gokogu for about a year.



Like my previous films, *The Cats of Gokogu Shrine* was shot spontaneously without a plan or prior research, following my “Ten Commandments of Observational Filmmaking.” Because Kiyoko’s involvement with the situation was what initiated my shooting, she naturally became a character in the film. As a result, the line between filmmakers and characters became ambiguous, which made this film a good example of “participant-observation.”

Living in Ushimado, I often contemplate the relationship between human beings and nature, a relationship that often seems to be on a course towards collapse. Observing the street cats of Gokogu, I realized that they haven’t lost their sense of wilderness. They are part of nature. In this sense, *The Cats of Gokogu Shrine* is a film which observes and examines the complex relationship between human beings and nature.

IN CONVERSATION with Kazuhiro Soda & Kiyoko Kashiwagi

Where does the idea of THE CATS OF GOKOGU SHRINE come from?

SODA: Kiyoko and I used to live in New York for 27 years since 1993, and when the pandemic happened in 2020 we were still living in New York. It was April 2020 when we came to Japan for the promotion and the theatrical release campaign of ZERO. At that time, the pandemic broke out in Japan too and we couldn't go back to New York due to the flights' cancellation. We didn't want to stay in Tokyo because it was really depressing. We were in Shinjuku, one of the most popular and lively areas in Tokyo, but everything was so dead, so depressing. We wanted to escape somewhere else.

And the first place that came into our mind was Ushimado, a small, ancient town by the Seto Inland Sea in Japan. It was where we came on holidays, where we had a house we could rent and also where we filmed our previous two films, OYSTER FACTORY and INLAND SEA. So we decided to escape to Ushimado temporarily.

But one day, I remember, being by the sea, it was so peaceful, I was taking a nap, and I got this idea about staying here forever. Just came to my mind. And I discussed it with Kiyoko, who was really surprised. But she eventually agreed. So, we decided to move to Ushimado from New York. It's like moving from the opposite world, from New York all covered in concrete, where everybody is so busy and ambitious and you have to compete and progress everyday...

KASHIWAGI: ... which I really loved by the way... I was really sad at first hearing that SODA wanted to move back to Japan. I was shocked, but eventually I agreed. But I am happy now.

SODA: It was a big change, a big decision and a big commitment. We made a decision to live in Ushimado, not just to visit... and in the process to settle down, we became friends with the local cats.

Ushimado is full of street cats and when you walk around you have to greet them. There were cats we wanted to take care of because they were in trouble, or because they were starving or having fights with other cats. In particular, there were two brothers, Chata and Chibishima... they were attacked by another local cat, they were losing their territory and they were miserable.

We felt we had to save them.

There was a local activist Tecchan, who was taking care of the local street cats, so we asked for his help. He is the same one taking care of all the cats in Gokogu Shrine and he was about to do a TNR / Trap-Neuter-Return, a well-known practice to trap cats, take them to a veterinarian to be neutered and vaccinated, and then return them to the street. He was in need of help and Kiyoko started helping him. And I casually started rolling the camera. Without thinking of a film. Being a filmmaker, I am always waiting for possibilities of making new films of course, but I didn't have a concrete idea of making a film about the cats. It was more like asking myself *do I want to film Kiyoko going tomorrow to help in the TNR...?* Well, maybe I go and film it.

KASHIWAGI: Really? I thought you asked Tecchan to get the permission...

SODA: Yes, of course. I asked Tecchan and he was fine with the possibility it could turn into a documentary film.

KASHIWAGI: Sorry, normally I'm the one who get the permission from our subjects, but this time, my head was packed with the TNR situation....

SODA: And then you know...because I was shooting the TNR, I stayed in Gokogu Shrine for a certain period. The TNR lasted for a few days, from morning to evening. And when I was there, I noticed that Gokogu was such an interesting place. Not only cat lovers come to the shrine to feed or take care of the cats, but it is a public space for people to come and go for different reasons.

Some to worship gods, others to enjoy gardening. Some people come to clean the shrine as volunteers, others just stop by on their way to fish at the shore nearby. And it is the perfect place for kids to play after school! So, it was my natural instinct to shoot whatever I felt interesting. And it became a fixed point of observation. And without knowing I had all the materials for the film. I ended up actually shooting for a year.

What happened during this year that you didn't keep in the film?

SODA: The editing process usually takes a long time. The first thing I do is watching the footage and re-observe what I observed during the shooting, because when you are shooting you can only watch everything once. But in the editing room you have the opportunity to watch it over and over again. And it's when you discover a lot of things. And then what I do is to edit first the most interesting scenes one by one, regardless of when they had happened. Then I ended up maybe having 70 to 80 interesting scenes. Then I put them together in one sequence. That is my first cut, that Kiyoko and I watch together. And it's when usually Kiyoko falls asleep. And that's when we know that is not working. And then, the second cut. We watch it again together. We discuss what is working, what is not working. Whatever doesn't make it to the final cut was probably less interesting for me. It was of course a very subjective decision.

How about the people in the film: the volunteers, the fishermen? Who are most of the volunteers? Locals? Retired people? Do they help to protect the collective environment of the city?

SODA: Many of them are local residents who are already retired. But some people visit Gokogu from far away places to meet and feed the cats or to take photographs.

Tecchan used to work for a large company, and now that he is retired, he devotes himself to rescue and take care of the cats. He is a very compassionate person. At the same time, there are local people who are not happy about people feeding the cats, because they leave poops in neighbourhood.

KASHIWAGI: Ushimado has a very long history of people arguing about cats I heard. There are always cats around because there are so many fishermen. And I imagine some people started feeding cats at Gokogu some decades ago. And that was the moment when cats' population started growing there, you know.. cats call cats.

SODA: It probably created a rumour among local cats ...people are feeding us at the shrine!

KASHIWAGI: And that created some tensions in the small town... but when we moved here, we didn't know about it. Personally, I love people as well as cats. And I wanted to become friends with everybody in town. Then slowly I understood that there were several different groups. And I was everywhere, in every group, listening to all the issues and positions among groups.

SODA: I could imagine everybody wanted to know which side Kiyoko was standing... but she wanted to be friends with everybody.

The situation seems to be very delicate and serious. Is the tension due to the fact that Gokogu is a shrine becoming a park for cats?

SODA: No. All the tension has nothing to do with Gokogu Shrine being a spiritual place. You see fights in different areas of Ushimado too. And everywhere in Japan. It is not uniquely in Ushimado.

KASHIWAGI: I know, but in Ushimado there are a lot of street cats...

SODA: Yes, because of the large population of street cats, the problem is bigger in Ushimado. And each person has a different attitude or opinion about cats. And that touches our emotion too.

For example, I personally love cats. To me, having them around, in the neighbourhood, it's just a blessing. I feel happy and lucky when I see them on the street. Some people feel the opposite. They are afraid their properties are invaded or ruined by their mischiefs, poops, and marking behaviours, which actually do happen. So, I totally understand their concerns. In the end, it's an emotional issue. That's why the fights have been quite hard. People had to come up with an idea to agree on. And one way was to agree on feeding the cats but limiting their population. That's why the idea of TNR came into play.

KASHIWAGI: I don't want to do it anymore actually. I did it because I believed TNR was the best solution to achieve coexistence between people and cats back then. I also wanted to help Tecchan who rescued the cats we are taking care of. But catching the cats, having them go through the operation...

SODA: It's quite harsh for the cats, although it has some benefits for them such as reducing certain diseases or fights between cats..

KASHIWAGI: Exactly! I did it for the cats. But while I was doing it, I slowly realized it's not natural. Their life is so short anyway. Most street cats live only for 3 to 5 years. So now even when I am asked, I'm reluctant to help them with the TNR.

SODA: But I have to say that it's less violent than killing them though. Anyway, it's a slow extinction process. When street cats were seen as a problem before, the government used to catch them and kill them in the shelters. That was normal. And now that they think it's too cruel, the government doesn't catch and kill them anymore. They encourage TNR instead. But using TNR is a way not to have street cats anymore in the long run. Slowly, they will disappear.

What is the status of cats in Japan?

KASHIWAGI: I think the society used to be OK with cats being around the neighbourhood. But now our society has changed. The situation is the same, but because the value of the society has changed, it became a quite big issue now.

SODA: Even with dogs. When I was little, I remember seeing street dogs in the neighbourhood. Of course, some of them were carrying diseases, but we were more relaxed and tolerant with them being around.

At the same time, we were also more violent and savage. If any danger, we would bring the dogs to the shelters to kill them. And that was also perfectly fine. It was more savage in a way, and we were used to more “irregular” stuff. Street cats are “irregular”, because they cannot be controlled. They do what they want, we cannot really control them. And we were fine with it, we had the kind of mindset to accept the way cats are. But not anymore. Now cats have to be controlled. And if you want to keep cats at home, they have to stay inside.

It's considered irresponsible for the owners to let them go out on the street. Shifting of mentality in our mind in the last 30-40 years is quite obvious. Our mind is gradually changing. Streets are getting more sanitised, under control, nothing irregular is permitted anymore.

Do you think that it has to do or it is more evident now after Covid? Maybe it was already there in the people's mentality, but Covid stressed so much more this idea of total control?

SODA: Yes, I think it accelerated the already apparent tendency. Street cats are somehow seen very similar to Covid, it's uncontrollable in nature. *How do we deal with them?* It's all about us and our attitude.

Before we were maybe humbler when we believed that there was something bigger than us. We didn't even think we could control everything in this world. But nowadays, human beings, we think of ourselves as Almighty, like we are the ruler of the world. There shouldn't be anything uncontrollable for us. That is the mentality we have and that's how we dealt with Covid everywhere in the world.

And that's how we are dealing with the street cats. For me, streets cats are like the frontiers of the nature. When you observe them day by day, they still keep their wilderness. They are totally different from house cats. Around this time of the year, for example, when the day gets longer, the mate season comes, and the cats become sexually active: fighting each other, courting each other. Male street cats change their territory to find a female cat to mate. Usually, each male cat has his concrete territory but that become shuffled around and reset this time of the year. When I observe them, I am so amazed that they are acting according to the nature, natural cycle of this planet. Street cats are part of the nature. That is why they are not controllable. And that's why we fear them. We fear because they are like Covid.

Many Japanese books and novels are about cats. Why do cats seem so important in Japanese arts?

SODA: I'm not sure if it's particular to Japanese arts, but that is probably because cats are part of nature, but at the same time so close to us as well. Although they are unpredictable and uncontrollable, they also show their affection to us like they are part of our family. It is something we feel when we walk on the street, when they spot us they come to greet us. Like Chata and Chibishima we are taking care of, they are still street cats. We feed them and we take care of them when they are in trouble, but they are still independent. They are somewhere in between, they are not completely domesticated, they are not completely in the wild. That's probably what is so fascinating about them for arts and literature.

KASHIWAGI: In Japan, we have statues of “maneki-neko” or “beckoning cat”, inviting fortune to your house. If you put a little statue of maneki-neko in front of your store, customers get attracted. Cat is a symbol of luck and fortune in Japan. But at the same time, cat is something scary, so they are often portrayed in ghost stories, like monster cats. Also, we never know what cats really think. Since they look very mysterious, we can put so much imagination on cats. We project ourselves to cats. Like an empty black box, an indirect way to express yourself.

Cat is often seen as an independent, even sometimes selfish, animal... while Japan is perceived as a country with a strong community and collective culture, where the individual often can disappear for the benefit of the group.

SODA: It may sound like too much generalization, but I think Japanese people are like dogs. Our attitude is the opposite of cats. We follow the rules, we are really good at working together. We are good in positioning ourselves in the group, rather than being independent and do whatever we want. Japanese culture and Japanese people seem to be more of a dog’s culture. We are all dogs. Cats are quite the opposite of who we are.

It’s kind of interesting to ask ourselves: *why do we feed cats? What is our motivation to feed them?* We don’t make money out of it. We actually spend money to feed them and to take care of them when they are ill. We can spend fortunes sometimes. *Why do we do that?*

That’s a big question. That is probably because cats are giving us a lot, they contribute a lot to human beings, even if it’s not their intention. There must be some sort of exchange. If there is nothing to gain for us, it couldn’t last. Cats can look as useless, not contributing to anything, taking advantage of you, but they are actually giving us a lot. It’s somehow an equal partnership.

Your film isn't just about cats. How did you work to balance the cats and the humans in the film?

SODA: When you observe how people deal with cats, you are actually observing the human society. If you observe the state of the street cats, you realize street cats cannot be separated from human society because they cannot survive without us. Observing street cats is observing human society. And that is what made me curious, made me want to explore more. That became my motivation to shoot the next scenes. And one thing leads to another. Following my ten commandments, I wouldn't do any research or any preparation beforehand. So, everything was spontaneous. But I ended up observing the human society by observing the cats.

KASHIWAGI: Our human society is getting more obsessed with cleanliness especially in developed countries. It should be super clean everywhere. No dust, no bacteria, no germs, no dirt, especially after Covid. So, for the street cats it's difficult to coexist with human beings. They are not clean at all, they are natural. After Covid, we got more and more neurotic even though we are also not clean. We sweat, we smell, with full of bacteria... and that's natural. In my opinion, trying to getting everything clean is impossible to achieve, we are surrounded by nature with all the viruses and bacteria. That's only natural. It seems dangerous to me because it's becoming an obsession.

SODA: In Ushimado, the community is very tight because most residents were born here, they went to school together, they grew up together, they know the family history of each others. That was interesting to me, because I am used to living in a big city like New York where everyone comes from everywhere, mixing together. Here is a monoculture, people are born here, live here and die here, a traditional pre-modern society, that used to be all over Japan. But unfortunately, it's disappearing, so with this film, we were witnessing probably the last generation of that traditional society.

Speaking of traditional society, there are so many shrines in Ushimado. I believe it's because Ushimado is a town really close to the nature. Without nature we cannot survive, but nature also can kill us. We cannot survive without the sea and its fishes, but the sea can kill us if there is a storm. Nature always has this duality. So, the shrines are the devices to control nature by praying gods for protection, for rain... for anything. Gokogu Shrine is also famous for fertility. People come here to pray for their pregnancies and to thank gods for their babies born. Human beings have been relying on gods to protect us in our daily life.

It's interesting that people do not associate cats with nature. Don't you see it as a contradiction?

SODA: There are so many contradictions... but that's how life is. When a fishermen gives his fresh catch to a cat, it means one more day of survival from a cat's point of view, but a death sentence from fish's point of view. And we fix our cats at the shrine which enshrines the gods of fertility! Shrines are probably almost the last public spaces left in modern Japan where everything is privately owned by somebody. Gokogu became a heaven for street cats because it is the last public space in the neighbourhood where anybody including non-human being like cats could freely come and go. Shrine are also on the verge of becoming extinct. Many have been abandoned, people do not worship them anymore, we do not have the motivation to worship them. We think we are in control, and we don't need to rely on gods. I knew I was witnessing and recording a culture that is on the verge of disappearing. One of the important roles of the documentary filmmakers is preserving some precious moments in a time capsule. That gave me a lot of motivation to shoot this film.

What happened to the three little kittens? Did anyone adopt them or did they become new guests of the shrine?

KASHIWAGI: Yes! Someone from Nagoya, which is quite far away from Ushimado adopted the three siblings together. It was so sweet! And it was Tecchan who begged them to adopt all three.

As a producer, how was working in the making of the film? You were much more involved this time. In which way you think this film is different from the previous observational films by Soda?

KASHIWAGI: This film is different because I am in the film a lot. It's Soda who has changed. In all the previous films, Soda was always very careful to keep me out of the frame. None of my fingers should have appeared in the picture. It made me very nervous being at the shooting. In INLAND SEA, I didn't know he was filming me... I was hiding, but when I saw the footage half of me was in the frame. It was a surprise. But in this one I am totally in. And I didn't like seeing myself in the film. But I gave up because I was totally involved in this project of TNR and I shouldn't hide myself. Anyway, I really don't like me in the film, but I had no choice. Normally, I am on Soda's side. I protect Soda and the film. And if someone complains, I am always there to explain about the projects. But this time I was in the opposite position, almost against him. Sometimes asking him not to film certain moments.

I was a real character in the film.

SODA: We actually had a lot of fights. When she was ready to do something, and I was a little bit late, to pick up the camera, she didn't wait for me.. she left before I got ready and I missed filming scenes...

KASHIWAGI: Timing is important, *why do I have to wait for the camera?* We need to keep going with cats, life goes on even faster with cats, you know...

SODA: When some cats were fighting and you were trying to intervene, of course, I wanted to film that scene...

KASHIWAGI: I didn't want cats to keep fighting, so I had to stop them... but he was asking me to wait... That's impossible.

SODA: So, I missed filming a lot of stuff...



It is also interesting in which way the dynamic changed... it is a different sensibility to be in front of the camera and to be the subject somehow, it must have been a different experience for you to be on the other side of the camera...

KASHIWAGI: Even if I wasn't the main character and I was just a little part of the film, still my part in the actual cats' project was not small. Working with local people was a huge project. I wanted them to trust me, which was not easy at all since I am a new comer in the small town. I like to work with them seriously. I felt I had so much responsibility taking care of everything, local people and local cats at the same time. I wanted them all to be happy, and I wanted to protect them. That's how I became friends with everybody.

SODA: It was a participant observational film. She is the producer of the film and she is also a character, but I think she felt more like a character than a producer. I used to work in TV documentary. Traditionally speaking, in a TV documentary you as a filmmaker have to be invisible. I was trained to be invisible, that's why I had a lot of problem including myself or Kiyoko when I was shooting MENTAL for example... but I gradually changed my idea about the concept of observation.

Because when it's about observing the world you cannot separate yourself from the world. You are always interacting with the world and the reality in front of you. And you are also changing the reality while you are observing because of your presence. It's an illusion that you can be a separate observer. So, it's more honest to include yourselves. I'm observing the world that includes ourselves. Including Kiyoko in the frame, is a natural progression for me. For this film, I had no hesitation to include her. It was inevitable.

THE CATS OF GOKOGU SHRINE give us the chance to observe so closely to such small environment, that is also very close to you. It's like watching it in a microscope.

SODA: And it is so complex! We don't know what's right and what's wrong, even the TNR, I can't say if it's wrong or it's right. All we can do is to observe, recognise and think about it.

Watching your film is somehow a very therapeutical way to reflect on ourselves. The stray cats are not supposed to be an issue...

SODA: It's important to stop reacting to whatever we are bombarded everyday. Instead, we need to calm down, to take our time, to observe the reality in front of us closely and attentively. I think that the hints are around us.

Why do we fight each other over the street cats? If we observe it carefully, that can give us a hint about even the wars in the other side of the world. Maybe it's overwhelming to think about the wars such as in Ukraine and in Israel. So, one way to deal with it could be to limit our scope to something manageable. If you look in a miniature, a small world like Gokogu, it could help you to understand larger problems we have.

For me, it's a way to understand the world, our nature, why we suffer, why we feel unhappy, why we have joys, why we are the way we are. Gokogu Shrine is about 30 seconds away from our house, and for this film I don't think we went out of 200 meters radius ... we filmed everything within 200 meters of Gokogu.

My scope of filming was really small, but this really small world is full of hints to understand the world we live in.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Kazuhiro Soda was born in Ashikaga, Japan in 1970. He studied religions at the University of Tokyo and filmmaking at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Soda is a Peabody Award winning filmmaker. He's also a recipient of the Marek Nowicki lifetime achievement prize awarded by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights. He practices an observational method of documentary filmmaking based on his own "Ten Commandments" which prohibits him from doing pre-shoot research or writing a synopsis before filming. He imposes these rules on himself in order to minimize preconceptions and to be able to make unexpected discoveries while filming and editing. Soda is also the author of nine books published in Japanese. One of his books *Why I Make Documentaries* has been translated into English, Korean, and Chinese.



His debut feature documentary ***Campaign*** (2007, Observational Film #1) was invited to many festivals after its Premiere at the Berlinale Forum and was aired in nearly 200 countries and territories around the world. It won the Peabody Award in the U.S.

Mental (2008, Observational Film #2) won numerous awards including Best Documentary Award at the Busan IFF and Dubai IFF.

Peace (2010, Observational Film Extra), after opening the DMZ Documentary Festival, won Best Documentary Award at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Audience Award at Tokyo Filmex.

Theatre 1 and Theatre 2 (2012, Observational Film #3 and #4) among other won the Young Juries Prize at the Festival des 3 Continents, in France.

Campaign 2 (2013, Observational Film #5) was invited to festivals such as Cinema du Reel in France, Hong Kong IFF, and MoMA Documentary Fortnight.

Oyster Factory (2015, Observational Film #6) premiered at the Locarno IFF and won among other the audience award of the Kinotayo Film Festival.

Inland Sea (2018, Observational Film #7) Premiered at Berlinale Forum while his ***The Big House*** (Observational Film #8) premiered at Berlin Critics' Week.

Zero (2020, Observational Film #9) had its World Premiere at MoMA Doc Fortnight 2020 – “Centerpiece” and its International Premiere at Berlinale Forum 2020.

THE CATS OF GOKOGU SHRINE (2024, Observational Film #10) will have its World Premiere at Berlinale Forum 2024.

PRODUCER'S BIOGRAPHY

Kiyoko Kashiwagi was born and raised in Okayama, Japan. She has produced ten of the observational films directed by Kazuhiro Soda, her husband, including *Campaign* (Berlinale 2007), *Mental* (Berlinale 2009), *Inland Sea* (Berlinale 2018), *Zero* (Berlinale 2020), and *The Cats of Gokogu Shrine* (Berlinale 2024).



Besides producing Soda's films, Kashiwagi is a professional Tai Chi Chuan player and teacher. She has earned a master diploma from Grand Master William Chi-Cheng Chen in New York. She is also a certified Qigong practitioner, and an accomplished dancer and choreographer. Ushimado, a small town where *Oyster Factory* (2015), *Inland Sea*, and *The Cats of Gokogu Shrine* was shot, is Kiyoko's mother's hometown. After living in New York for 27 years, Kashiwagi and Soda moved to Ushimado in 2021.

"TEN COMMANDMENTS" OF OBSERVATIONAL FILMMAKING By Kazuhiro Soda

I have made eleven feature length documentaries so far using the same method and style. I call them "observational films" not only because they are inspired by the tradition of observational cinema, but also because I believe in the power of observation.

When I say "observation" in this context, I do not mean maintaining a distance from my subjects or being a neutral third party.

On the contrary, it is about looking and listening attentively. Furthermore, there are two aspects to observation. Firstly, I as a filmmaker closely observe the reality in front of me and make films according to my observations and discoveries, not based on my assumptions or preconceptions I had before I shot the film.

Secondly, I encourage viewers to observe the film actively with their own eyes and minds. In order to realize these two aspects, I came up with these "Ten Commandments" for me to follow. They are:

- 1 No research.
- 2 No meetings with subjects.
- 3 No scripts.
- 4 Roll the camera yourself.
- 5 Shoot for as long as possible.
- 6 Cover small areas deeply.
- 7 Do not set up a theme or goal before editing.
- 8 No narration, super-imposed titles, or music.
- 9 Use long takes.
- 10 Pay for the production yourself.

"TEN COMMANDMENTS" OF OBSERVATIONAL FILMMAKING

By Kazuhiro Soda

These policies were conceived based on my frustrating experiences as a television documentary director before I started making films. As a television director, I was required to do a lot of research and to write detailed scripts before shoots.

I felt this process made it harder for me to discover anything beyond my imagination and expectation because I was bound by my own knowledge, preconceived notions, and plans. I was also forced to explain everything to the viewers by including narration, super-imposed titles, and music, all of which seemed to obstruct the viewers from really observing what was on screen.

In other words, I found that these practices prevented me from making documentaries with eye-opening discoveries for both the audience and myself. So I decided to do the opposite.

Kazuhiro SODA © 2024 Laboratory X, Inc.

FILMOGRAPHY

THE CATS OF GOKOGU SHRINE

Gokogu no Neko

Documentary, Observational Film #10, 119 minutes, 2024

- Berlin International Film Festival 2024 (Forum)

ZERO

Seishin 0

Documentary, Observational Film #9, 128 minutes, 2020

- Berlinale Forum, MoMA Doc Fortnight "Centerpiece"

- Ecumenical Jury Prize, Berlinale Forum

- Mongolfière d'Or Award, Best Film, Festival des 3 Continents

THE BIG HOUSE

The Big House

Documentary, Observational Film #8, 119 minutes, 2018

- Berlin Critics' Week, Sheffield Doc/Fest, Ann Arbor Film Festival

INLAND SEA

Minatomachi

Documentary, Observational Film #7, 122 minutes, 2018

- Berlin IFF, IDFA, Hong Kong IFF, Cinema du Reel, Art of the Real

OYSTER FACTORY

Kaki Kouba

Documentary, Observational Film #6, 145 minutes, 2015

- Audience Award, Kinotayo Film Festival

- Official Selection: Locarno Film Festival, Festival des 3 Continents,
Hong Kong IFF, Vancouver IFF

CAMPAIGN 2

Senkyo 2

Documentary, Observational Film #5, 149 minutes, 2013

- Official Selection: Cinema du Reel, Dubai IFF, MoMA Documentary
Fortnight, Hong Kong IFF



FILMOGRAPHY

THEATRE 2

Engeki 2

- Documentary, Observational Film #4, 170 minutes, 2012
- Young Jury's Prize, Festival des 3 Continents
 - Official Selection: Busan IFF, Festival des 3 Continents

THEATRE 1

Engeki 1

- Documentary, Observational Film #3, 172 minutes, 2012
- Young Jury's Prize, Festival des 3 Continents
 - Official Selection: Busan IFF, Festival des 3 Continents

PEACE

Peace

- Documentary, Observational Film Extra, 75 minutes, 2010
- Audience Award, Tokyo Filmex
 - Best Documentary Award, Hong Kong IFF
 - Buyens-Chagoll Prize, the Visions du Reel
- Opening Film, DMZ Korean International Documentary Festival

MENTAL

Seishin

- Documentary, Observational Film #2, 135 minutes, 2008
- Berlinale Forum
 - Best Documentary, Pusan IFF
 - Best Documentary, Dubai IFF
 - Special Jury Mention, Miami IFF
- Outstanding Documentary Award, Hong Kong IFF
- Inter-religious Jury Prize, Visions du Reel

CAMPAIGN

Senkyo

- Documentary, Observational Film #1, 120 minutes, 2007
- Berlinale Forum
 - Peabody Award, 2008
 - Best Film, Belgrade IFF



FILMOGRAPHY

MY SON WAS KILLED

Soshite Musuko ha Korosareta

Documentary, 20 minutes, 2005, NHK

111 FIRST IN WINTER

Mafuyu no 111

Documentary, 20 minutes, 2005, NHK

NEW YORKERS

New Yorkers

Documentary, 20 minutes, produced more than 30 episodes, 1997-2003, NHK

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Documentary, 110 minutes, 2004, NHK

SOLOMON GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Solomon Guggenheim Museum

Documentary, 25 minutes, 2004, NHK

FESTIVAL OF THE SUN (NHK)

Taiyo no Matsuri

Documentary, 120 minutes, 2002, NHK

INTERNET ADOPTION

Intanetto de Kazoku ga Umareru

Documentary, 59 minutes, 2001, NHK

THE FLICKER

The Flicker

Fiction, 17 minutes, 1997

- Venice IFF

- Max Orphuls Preis Int. Film Festival, Germany

FILMOGRAPHY

FREEZING SUNLIGHT

Freezing Sunlight

Fiction, 85 minutes, 1996

- Sao Paulo International Film Festival

A NIGHT IN NEW YORK

A Night in New York

10 minutes, 1995

- Flanders International Film Festival

A FLOWER AND A WOMAN

A Flower and a Woman

5 minutes, 1995

- Special Commendation, Canadian IFF

CREDITS

Directed, produced, shot and edited by Kazuhiro Soda
Produced by Kiyoko Kashiwagi
Casts: Cats, People, and living beings of Ushimado

International Sales: Asian Shadows
Japanese distributor: Tofoo LLC
English subtitles: Aya Ogawa and Kazuhiro Soda

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Observational Film #10
by Kazuhiro Soda

THE
CATS OF
GOKOGRU
SHRINE
GOKOGRU NO NEKO

Documentary, 2024, 119 minutes, Japan
Directed, produced, shot, and edited by Kazuhiro Soda | Produced by Kiyoko Kashiwagi
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