

The Politics of Listening and the Narration of Trauma in Sakai Kō and Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's Tōhoku Trilogy

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More than four years have passed since a vast area of the Tōhoku region of North Eastern Japan was hit by an unprecedented and massive earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. Immediately after the earthquake, catastrophic images of the disaster proliferated throughout the world. Aside from those who transmitted information through cell phones and social media, TV broadcasters were the first to capture the devastation. The representations of the disaster were constantly broadcast on television, transmitted and disseminated via the internet and social media.¹ The media coverage intensified further with the explosions from the melt-downs at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. The trauma of the national disaster was thus doubled by the man-made nuclear catastrophe. Just as the 9/11 Twin Tower disaster in New York, people from all over the world obsessively looked for information, documents, and images in an attempt to come to some understanding of what was happening in the area, caught between a morbid fascination with the spectacular phenomenon and the sheer horror of the magnitude of the devastation and impending nuclear crisis. Those who were not directly affected by the immediate destruction experienced the attack vicariously through these images. This was ironically not the case, however, with the people directly affected in the ravaged areas. They were shielded from the multitude of images of disaster, because there was no electricity in the affected regions in the immediate aftermath of the disasters and for some time thereafter.

The film communities and individual directors reacted to the disaster quickly. Many of them seem to have felt the need to record the disaster with their cameras. As early as May 2011, Sendai Mediatheque launched a project, “Center for Remembering 3.11,” a project which encourages the collaboration of media studios, experts and staff, citizens and filmmakers with the aim of sharing information and promoting the recording and preservation of photos, films and texts, archiving the process of disaster recovery (<http://recorder311-e.smt.jp/>). Sakai Kō and Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's Tōhoku trilogy, consisting of *The Sound of the Waves* (2011), *Voices from the Waves* (2013), and *Storytellers* (2013), was produced as part of the Sendai Mediatheque project of “Center for Remembering 3.11.”

In October, twenty-nine films were screened under the section entitled “Cinema With Us” at the 2011 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, including an earlier, longer

version of *The Sound of the Waves*. The 29 selected films mostly dealt directly with the Tōhoku earthquake, but also included such relevant films as Wu Yii-feng's *Gift of Life* (2002), a critically acclaimed film about the disastrous 1999 earthquake in Taiwan, which was screened at the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival in 2003.² Along with the screenings, discussion forums were held.

Since then, a great deal has been recorded, transmitted, exhibited, written, discussed, and debated, scholarly or otherwise, inside and outside Japan.³ Nonetheless, we have already witnessed the willful forgetting of the disaster. Already, raw, painful memories of the disaster have readily been transformed into moving stories to create a false sense of bonding, subject to consumption. The academic fever of discussing the disaster seems to have subsided.⁴ Have we already become jaded consumers of information, leaving the lives of the people in the region behind?

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In order to contextualize my discussion of the trilogy, *The Sound of the Waves* in particular, I would like first to make a few observations about the visual representations of the March 11 disaster. Aside from a few fiction films produced as well as countless visual materials transmitted by social network,⁵ the majority of the visual representations belong to the generic news coverage of the mass media, whose main purpose is to deliver “information” by documenting the disaster as visual record. They range from official NHK news coverage to some raw, unedited footage taken by a local TV journalist who happened to capture the tsunami as it was unfolding.⁶ Often presented in packaged news programs and televisual documentaries published in numerous DVD collections with the title of “記録 the records” or “証言 the testimonies” of the Great Tōhoku Earthquake and Tsunami, they form a body of visual presentations of the disaster.⁷

As if to compensate for or contrast with such news coverage or reportage, independent filmmakers, many of them coming from outside the Tōhoku region, also published their films, presenting their own views. Motivated by a sense of mission and responsibility tinged with uncontrollable curiosity, they rushed to the region to bear witness to the disaster, to see the “site” with their own eyes, especially the unreported territories of the devastation, be they dead bodies or radioactive contaminated areas.

Well-known examples of such documentaries include: *The Sketch of Mujō*, released in June 2011, directed by Ōmiya Kōichi who started filming within a month after the earthquake; *311*, premiered in October 2011 at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, co-directed by Mori Tatsuya, Matsubayashi Yōju, Watai Takeharu, and Yoshioka Takaharu, who felt obliged to get to the site and see it with their own eyes, record it with their camera; and *No Man's Zone*, premiered in November, 2011 at the TOKYO FILMEX, by Fujiwara Toshifumi, who tried to trespass into the forbidden zone in Fukushima in order for the camera to bear witness to the devastated landscape and the nuclear crisis. Instead of filming the immediate aftermath of the disaster, in his *Nuclear Nation 1* (2012) and *Nuclear Nation 2* (2014),⁸ Funahashi Atsushi

focuses on the nuclear disaster, by chronicling the course of events that happened in the small village Futabamachi in Fukushima prefecture, which was forced to evacuate due to heavy radioactivity from the Fukushima nuclear disaster. These films are exhibited worldwide at film festivals, and later subject to scholarly discussions and examinations.

In addition to the images of debris and desolation, they include the people who are left with the devastation and loss, who are introduced through interviews of the local residents and survivors, often bringing narrative elements into the world of documentation and reportage. They reframe the images into their own perspectives, be they political or non-political, controversial or reconciling. Although the intent to bear witness to what is going on in the region remains the same, the way in which these films present their materials differs greatly, especially in terms of the positioning of the filmmaker vis-à-vis the images they film and present in their films. *The Sketch of Mujō* presents itself primarily as a collection of visual documents, without the filmmaker inserting his own views directly — he does not appear in the film, nor does he use voice-over narration. As the title indicates, however, the film consists of the filmmaker's personal “素描 sketch” of the state of “無情 no mercy,” invoking constantly the religious concept of “無常 the impermanence of all things.” In so doing, the devastation captured by the camera, which refuses easy understanding and comprehension, is now edited into a kind of personal narrative. It follows in a sense the generic convention of personal documentary, blending the unsettling images of the devastated landscape with heartbreaking interviews, accompanied by music. The director thus appeals to the viewer's emotions, invoking culturally motivated understanding and aesthetic conventions.

On the other hand, *311* presents itself as clearly an intervention by the outsider. The film unabashedly reveals the perspective of inquisitive, curious onlookers, who rushed from Tokyo to the region only to bear witness to the actuality of the disaster. The film exhibits the filmmakers' rather wicked excitement at the sight of the devastation as they drive through the region, and at the high level of radiation near the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant. In fact, in one of the most famous and controversial sequences in the film, the film shows unmediated footage in which the filmmakers violate the unwritten taboo of filming a dead body, inducing the anger of family and friends on the scene. In another scene, standing by mothers searching for the bodies of their missing children, the filmmaker expresses his own guilt at being intrusive and even asks the mothers to take out their indignation on him, claiming that he is there for them. *311* thus consciously underlines the filmmakers' active presence and engagement into the site to the extent that it indeed is intrusive and conflictive. The film did provoke varied responses at the screening, and was especially criticized for reflecting “disaster tourism.” It raises questions about whether or not the violent intrusion of the camera into the private sphere of community suggests that the filmmakers' active violation be legitimated as a right not as a privilege. Despite the filmmakers' opposition to any kind of censorship, either from within or without, their assumption that the filmmakers' intervention should ultimately be secured at any cost is still open to dispute.

In contrast, both Fujiwara's *No Man's Zone* and Funahashi's *Nuclear Nation* deliver strong political messages, though their approach differs. *No Man's Zone* reflects the politics of images,

constantly warning us about the danger of consuming the catastrophic spectacle. By extensively employing the voice-over narration and cinematic devices, exemplified in the opening 360 degrees panning shot, Fujiwara directly addresses the viewer as an author of visual representation and narrative construction, a strategy avoided by Ōmiya and the collaborators of *311*.

His questioning the politics of the image and visual representation of the disaster, and reminding us of our responsibility and the consequences of irreplaceable loss, are well justified. However, in the end, Fujiwara privileges his authorial intervention both aesthetically and ideologically so much so that it compromises the film's ultimate credibility with a narcissistic gesture of a concerned artist. On the other hand, Funahashi's film focuses on the people who were forced to flee their hometown because of the radioactive nuclear contamination. He follows them closely, chronicles the villagers' evacuation, the relocation to another evacuation center, and then village head's struggles to appeal for anti-nuclear policies to be implemented in the future. Because the film was not provoked by the shocking devastation of the disaster itself but rather the grave and long-lasting repercussions of the nuclear crisis, *Nuclear Nation* follows the documentary filmmaking tradition of chronicling an event.

In overview, what is at issue in these films is the ethical and aesthetic responsibility of the camera and the filmmakers as the mediators between the disaster and society at large. Whatever the filmmaker's ethical and aesthetic positions are, however, they inevitably underline the visual aspect of the disaster, with and without the people in the images. We as the viewers are constantly exposed to the visual representations of the disaster, easily fixated on the spectacular images, sometimes even seduced by them. They all seem to claim, "seeing is believing," and this is exactly where *The Sound of the Waves* radically differs.

3

Among the documentary films made during the last four years, Sakai and Hamaguchi's Tōhoku trilogy occupies a special place, in terms of both form and content. With an intention to participate in Sendai Mediatheque's "Center for Remembering Project," then director of the Faculty of the Arts, the Tokyo University of the Arts decided to undertake its own film project, and assigned Hamaguchi, a graduate of the film school, to make a documentary film.⁹ He agreed and went to the region. But he was totally at a loss, realizing the hardship and difficulty of materializing the project, he decided to ask Sakai, who was also a graduate of the film school, for help and they decided to work on the project together. According to Sakai, he was invited to join the project because Hamaguchi did not have a driver's license, but Sakai could drive; and it was physically impossible for Hamaguchi to make a film without a car because of the vastness of the devastated areas, which expanded from three prefectures, with no public transportation yet available.

Neither Sakai nor Hamaguchi had ever made documentary films before; this was their first project dealing with a non-fiction subject.¹⁰ Unlike the other self-motivated filmmakers I have just referred to, their project started as an assignment. They also came in too late to capture the momentum. When they started filming, a few months had already passed and such films

as *Sketch of Mujo*, 311, and *No Man's Zone*, were already in production. They did not have a lot of resources or manpower, either. They decided to interview people, instead of filming the devastation of the area. From 2011 to 2013, they conducted a series of interviews and recorded conversations with residents of the affected areas in vast regions of Tōhoku.

The result is the minimalist style of filmmaking exemplified by *The Sound of the Waves*. At first, one may argue that the style and the structure of the trilogy are probably chosen out of necessity, technical and logistical limitation rather than resulting from planned aesthetic decisions. However, it soon becomes clear that the way in which the film is composed is an aesthetically and ethically conscious choice by the directors in order to make the best use of the limited conditions of filmmaking.

As a rule, all three films of the trilogy show people narrating their stories, be they personal experiences of the earthquake or the tsunami or local folktales, bracketed by images of scenery captured from inside a car on the road from place to place in the affected areas of Tōhoku. In the simplest settings with some chairs, desks and tables, in barely furnished rooms in most cases, people sit and talk, narrating various stories. No additional images are inserted to illustrate their stories when they speak, no emotional music accompanies their narratives in a bid to heighten drama, and no extra information is presented about them or their lives.

In the first two films of the trilogy, *The Sound of the Waves* and *Voices from the Waves*, the focus is on the survivors. Both films consist of scenes in which people converse with each other about their experiences during the earthquake and the tsunami, reflecting on their experiences and how they and their lives have been affected by it. The scenes are punctuated by the scenes of the directors moving from one location to another. The third film, *Storytellers*, on the other hand, is not about the disaster as such. It features a few elderly women and men sharing old folktales unrelated to the disasters that have been passed down in the Tōhoku region for generations. The sequences of storytelling are punctuated by shots of conversations taken from inside a moving car between the filmmakers and Ms. Ono Kazuko, the founder of the Miyagi Folktales Association, who has been collecting local folktales for years. These shots introduce each storyteller.

As the trilogy unfolds, we realize it in one way or another deals with the lessons of survival, implicitly confronting us with what we should learn from the history of individual experiences in both private and public terms. At the same time, these films shed light on the subtle complexities of the singularity of each experience, manifested forcibly in the optical records of individual storytelling as captured by the camera.

4

In *The Sound of the Waves*, we listen to stories, which invariably convey the fear and shock experienced during the disaster. In doing so, we come to realize that it is impossible to generalize each narrator's experience. The film begins with picture-card slides about a story of a girl and her grandfather, the sole surviving family member from the disastrous tsunami on June 15, 1896 (known as the 1896 Meiji Sanriku Earthquake), who endlessly recounted his experience to

his granddaughter, who in turn experienced another big tsunami in the Showa era on March 3, 1933 (known as the 1933 Showa Sanriku Earthquake), which ravaged the region. The shots of local graves and the monument to the 1933 tsunami disaster immediately follow, giving silent voice to her repressed tears. The film then shows her and her sister in dialogue about the most recent earthquake with occasional interventions by Hamaguchi. In *The Sound of the Waves*, the voice-over narration of the director is presented with the scenes shot during their drive from one city to another for interviews.¹¹

After the opening scenes, five interviews will follow: three men who have worked as local volunteer fire company and survived the disaster; one woman who has lost her dearest friend; a city councilor who did not see the tsunami with his own eyes but his wife did; a couple who survived the tsunami after having been swept away; and two young sisters who experienced the earthquake but whose family and relatives all survived. Strictly speaking, the format of their conversations is not an interview, though one of the directors sits with them during the conversation; if the speakers know each other, they seem to talk freely in response to the questions asked by the director.

According to the directors, after they had decided to make the film basically consist of people's interviews, they looked for potential interviewees, but not without difficulty.¹² They met them, and if they agreed, asked them the same three questions: 1) could they provide a brief introduction of themselves, 2) what were they doing when the earthquake occurred, 3) what were they doing three days after the quake. They chose the stories and asked the interviewees to recount their stories again in a rehearsal, and then filmed their conversations. In most cases, the speakers know each other as friends or family members, except in two cases in which either Sakai or Hamaguchi takes up the role of the interviewer or the listener. When the interviewee did not have a pairing person, one of the directors became the interviewer/listener. The directors also made it a rule to separate the roles of filming and editing. That is, if Sakai sits with the people during the shooting, Hamaguchi does the editing, and vice versa. After each interview, they spent hours discussing the result, and the conversation presented is the result of careful editing.¹³

Although there are common expressions and similar experiences, each story and experience told in the film is radically different. Such differences may come from differences in background, age, gender, occupation, and family history, or personality. Some narrators are more open than others, some more reticent. Some are more cheerful, and some more serious. Those who have lost their families and friends express more acute pain. Those who actually witnessed the tsunami or were swept away by it have different views on the future from those who did not directly experience it, including whether or not they would continue to live in the area after recovery and reconstruction. Whatever damage they might have had from the disaster, however, they are the ones who survived. They are keenly aware of those who suffered more, and those who did not survive. These differences become starker and more evident through the repetitive nature of the filmic construction.

5

What is most striking in the trilogy, however, is the way in which the filmmakers incorporate elements of fiction filmmaking into the documentary construction of the events. In fact, *The Sound of the Waves* may at first feel perplexing, or boring or even disappointing to some viewers. Our expectation to see typical images of the disaster, such as debris and destruction, searching or wandering lost people at the site of the devastation, or people living in the evacuation centers, is betrayed. Half an hour into the film, it becomes evident that the film will only show people talking to each other. One cannot help but feel that something different is going on.

In conventional documentaries that generally aim to educate viewers with edifying information, people's testimonies are presented as non-fictional truth *in order to* convey specific messages. They often use voice-over narration as an omnipresent guide to form a neatly organized narrative in the viewer's mind so that the viewers unconsciously feel they "understand" the event. Underlining the non-fiction nature of the event, they emphasize real people talking about their real experiences, while downplaying the various cinematic manipulations used in the process of reconstructing the event into an organized narrative. Such elements as the presence of the camera or the use of music are supposed to be made unobtrusive so that the viewers can concentrate on the natural flow of information. This emphasis on the natural flow of information authenticates the representation as unmediated reality. Ultimately, the content is what matters. Filmmakers usually choose the best way to deliver the content; the less conspicuous the form is, the better.

The film scholar and expert in documentary films, Mark Nornes is quoted to have made an interesting observation about the characteristics of 3.11 cinematic representations in comparison to films about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to Nornes, filmmakers seem to employ similar formal strategies to depict the magnitude of the disaster, but facing the aftermath of the atomic bomb catastrophe, they used pans from a fixed camera position. He continues: "Today, they have replaced the pan with the truck. Or more specifically, the car or bike. The tsunami films are chock full of lengthy shots photographed from moving vehicles."¹⁴ Although the film does include brief shots taken from the moving car in between the interviews, the stylistic choices used in filming the interviews are very conspicuous in the way the speakers are filmed. In the course of viewing the film, as we slowly notice that our subconscious expectation of certain visual representations of the disaster is betrayed in *The Sound of Waves*, we realize that such representations have already become conventionalized and, therefore, entirely familiarized.¹⁵ The film carefully avoids the familiar methods and manners used for conventional TV news or documentary films about disastrous events.

In usual setting of interviews in the film, we see the speakers alone in the frame, often in a long-take, talking to off-screen interviewers so that the artificiality of the situation is usually unrecognized. In *The Sound of the Waves*, however, men and women do not speak alone to the interviewer behind the camera. They are often presented as a pair, sitting face to face, and

speaking to each other. Shots alternate between the speakers; that is the typical shot/reverse-shot structure used in continuity editing showing two people in conversation in the classical Hollywood cinema. The filmmakers utilize one of the most common stylistic conventions of narrative film in their documentary subject, and throughout the trilogy, they choose to employ this editing style when filming the narrators. They formally structure the film as if it were a fiction, narrative film, thereby challenging the generic conventions of documentary filmmaking.

But not only do they use the fictional style, Sakai and Hamaguchi also modify this conventional style so as to go against its conventionality. The shot/reverse-shot structure is typically used to situate the viewers right in the middle of the conversation, crossing over the screen boundary, inviting them to identify closely with the fictional characters. In the classical Hollywood cinema, characters hardly look at the camera so as to position the viewer as the anonymous voyeur. The directors seem to be quite aware of the dangers of the seductive appeal of voyeurism in the use of this editing strategy. Instead, they film the speaking subjects looking directly into the camera, their gazes aimed directly at us. This is generally regarded as a violation of the 180 degree rule. But some directors have used this exceptional shooting method extensively, most notably Ozu Yasujirō (also Jean-Luc Godard and Wim Wenders, to name a few). By taking advantage of the conventions of the shot/reverse-shot structure while at the same time violating it, the directors manage to engender a contrasting, almost alienation effect in documentary filmmaking. The film constantly reminds the viewers of the presence of the camera, yet at the same time, encourages us to concentrate on the act and the process of narration. In this manner, rather than being seduced to adopt a voyeuristic position vis-à-vis the world of fiction, the viewers become aware that each narrator is a real person in the real world, not a fictional character.

6

Moreover, due to the visual power of close-ups in each frontal shot, we cannot help but attend to all the subtleties of facial expressions, of body reactions, of tones of voice. The stories told then are no longer simple descriptions of what happened to the narrators, but an invitation for viewers, who have not had the same experiences, to share in the slow unfolding of their affective experiences. It is in fact the affection-image *par excellence* in the Deleuzian sense. Here the paradox reveals itself. On the one hand, the bare background of the interview setting reinforces the power of the close-up as the affection-image to transform the narrative space into “any space whatever.” As Deleuze explains, “the close-up retains the same power to tear the image away from spatio-temporal coordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed. Even the place, which is still present in the background, loses its co-ordinates and becomes ‘any space whatever.’”¹⁶ What lies behind the affection-image is fear, as Deleuze suggests. On the other hand, however, the extensive employment of the shot/reverse-shot editing paradoxically sutures the abstraction of affect in the close-ups into the real world of the survivors’ affective experiences that resist the abstraction itself. In a sense, this is the

paradoxical dynamics of cinematic seeing and listening, caught between the visual abstraction of affect and the aural psychic transference of affect through rhythms and tones, which testify to the lived experience.

The effect of such cinematic articulation of the stories told by the narrators is the rediscovery of the power of narrating and the politics of listening in documentary filmmaking. Storytelling requires both tellers of tales and listeners to those tales. Sakai and Hamaguchi started as listeners themselves when they began filming, and they searched for ways to capture the power of storytelling with their cameras in an attempt to reconstruct it in a manner as forceful as the original. In the course of *The Sound of the Waves*, we slowly become avid listeners, invited to share in the act of narrating and listening.

There thus emerges a certain sense of simultaneity of the onscreen unfolding of the storytelling with the experiences of the viewers in the theater. By way of being invited to participate in reproducing the act of narrating and listening, we no longer simply watch and hear *about* their experiences as distant observers. But rather, we actually share the *affective moments of expression* with the narrators. As Hungarian psychoanalyst, Nicolas Abraham's work on the phenomenology of expression articulates: "If the poet expresses his passion we also say that he *expresses* his public. From this perspective, it is not his personal passions, but the addresses themselves who constitute the object of the expression. A surprising result of this state of affairs, of a sociological order, is that the term "expression" is enriched with a new nuance: it now indicates the *reference of an individual activity to a collectivity within which it is produced*."¹⁷

We then comprehend that the narrators also relive their experiences when they recount their no longer raw and unmediated stories. Through a meticulous framing of the speaking subjects and a rigid control over the camera placement, the filmmakers achieve such an extraordinary effect. By exploiting the cinematic style of narrative film but with a highly self-reflexive modification of its effect, *The Sound of the Waves* manages to underscore the documentary process of articulation and narration, capturing the intimate moments of interaction in real life, making the viewer an emotionally and intellectually engaged participant, rather than a voyeuristic onlooker.

7

In psychoanalysis, the talking cure was a point of departure. In dealing with trauma, talking is the first step towards coming to terms with the wound. The trilogy, both at the site of production and reception, creates a space where the unbearable reality of the disaster and the feeling of loss are first evoked, and then by recounting the experiences of going through the unspeakable event, the space can be transformed into a public sphere, in which personal intimacy attains a certain political dimension and begins to represent the recovery process. It is also an act of reclaiming the affective ties that have been violently severed by the loss and the damage caused by the disaster. Recounting the actual experiences is always fused with fiction and memory.

Even in *Storytellers*, which does not directly deal with the disaster, the vivid recounting of local folktales by storytellers is not simply about the content of the stories. What underlies these stories is the collective memory of the hardships experienced by the local communities. In the act of narrating, a folktale is transformed into the private fantasy of the storyteller. The practice of narrating folktales translates the personal expression of suffering and the hardships of survival in everyday life. The film captures the incredibly rich moments of the story being generated by the act of storytelling; in fact, we are not only fascinated by the stories themselves, but more mesmerized by the strong voices of the female storytellers, with their different melodic tones, rhythms and tempos. They narrate as they sing, as the original Japanese title of *Storytellers* “*Utahito*” (singers) articulates.

As I have mentioned, the first story presented in the opening sequence of *The Sound of the Waves* is the 86 year old woman talks about her grandfather's stories in the self-made picture-card slides. The concluding film of the trilogy is *Storytellers*, whose focus has moved from recording the survivors to the storytellers who pass down the rich tradition of storytelling in the Tōhoku region. As seen as a trilogy, we recognize that the first story in the picture-card slides show, presented with some shots of graves and monuments in *The Sound of the Waves*, epitomizes the entire trilogy in the contemporary mode of representation and articulation. Instead of the picture-card slide show, we now have the cinema. Instead of one old woman telling her story to the local community, the trilogy is now exhibited for the concerned audiences both in Japan and abroad.

The trilogy is thus as much about memory, both private and collective, as about traumatic disaster. The three films testify to the power of the act of narrating, the complexity of human emotions, the incredible ability of reflection, and the long tradition of storytelling in the Tōhoku region. They convey in a highly nuanced manner the tragic loss felt by the survivors in the community, and at the same time, we witness the empowering and transformative process of telling and retelling traumatic experiences that unfold in the course of the film.

In the end, the Tōhoku trilogy defies any simple distinction between fiction and non-fiction, between narrative and documentary, enticing us to reflect on the intricate relationship between cinema and memory, between images and voices, and the production of a site where private and collective memories converge, through which new social and political awareness is generated. As we listen to the stories told and retold on screen during the viewing experience of the trilogy, we are transformed into the social subject, bearing witness to the production of meaning in our attempt to come to terms with the disaster. Despite the enormity of the damage and the tragic loss of life experienced by people in the Tōhoku region, in the body of each and every person who appears on the screen lies a story — their bodies and their voices attest to the power of remembrance, so forcibly and cinematically demonstrated in the trilogy.

Notes

This is a revised version of the manuscript I wrote for my talk originally entitled “The Power of Narrating and the Politics of Listening in Sakai Kō and Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's Tōhoku Documentary Trilogy,” given

after the screening of *The Sound of Waves* at the National Chiao Tung University on November 13, 2015 for a symposium entitled “Visual Culture and Social Mediation in East Asia” organized by Professor Earl Jackson, Jr. I would like to thank Professor Jackson and the university for their generous invitation. I would also like to dedicate this article to the late Chantal Akerman, whose films radically explore the boundaries of fiction, expanding the possibilities of cinema as an aesthetic invention of public and private memory.

- 1 I happened to be in Tel Aviv at the time of the earthquake and therefore the TV images broadcast on BBC were my first experience of the incident. Thus, my experience was never direct, but rather always mediated by the media representations.
- 2 The list of films can be found at <http://www.yidff.jp/2011/2011list.html#p11>. The program has become regular one and in 2015, the third edition of the “Cinema With Us” program was held at the festival, initiated by Ogawa Naoto, curator at the Sendai Mediatheque.
- 3 Unfortunately in the present socio-political climate, however, there is a strong sense that the disaster is increasingly being downplayed, to say the least, under the present conservative, neo-liberal leadership of Abe Shinzō. As we all know, the recovery process in the region is so slow. There are still so many people living in temporary housing, still evacuated from their hometowns because of the high radioactivity near the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. Moreover, we have since witnessed disasters after disasters, gigantic earthquakes, devastating floods, and landslides in numerous local areas all over the world. However, the magnitude of the March 11 disaster seems to be somewhat singular, if not uniquely exceptional, partly because of the vastness of the affected areas, the combination of different natural disasters, the earthquake and the tsunami, worsened and with the concomitant and man-made Fukushima catastrophe.
- 4 There was a news report that while on March 11, 2016 many TV programs were aired to commemorate the 5th year after the earthquake, the ratings of these programs are reported to be very low. This may be an indication of the nation’s unconscious attitude of active forgetting. However, documentary films are continuously produced and exhibited. One of the significant documentaries made recently is Inoue Jun’ichi’s *Daichi o uketsugu* (Inheriting the Land), released in February 2016 in Tokyo about a Fukushima farmer, the eighth generation of a farming family, whose father committed suicide two weeks after the big earthquake.
- 5 In 2012, a few fiction films directly dealing with the disaster appeared, including Sono Shion’s *The Land of Hope*, Kimizuka Ryōichi’s *Reunion* (the Japanese original title is “遺体 明日への十日間,” literally The Dead Body 10 Days for Tomorrow). Last year, a fiction film about the Fukushima nuclear disaster entitled “家路 *Homeland*” directed by Kubota Nao, was released. Compared with the rich filmography of documentary, it is yet too early to make comprehensible examinations or critical evaluations of fiction films. It is understandable because most visual representations of the non-fictional variety, filmic or otherwise, have strong narrative elements in them, all the more because each story told, as well as each testimony heard, has as much as or more power in it as a narrative to be told. Although fiction films are worth examining closely, I will not include them in my discussion here.
- 6 In additional images of the first 50 days after the quake, this was included and released in October 2011 in a DVD collection, “3.11 The Tōhoku Earthquake: The Record of the Earthquake and Tsunami.”
- 7 One of the best examples is NHK’s “Collection of Testimonies Series,” which has aired once a month on Sunday morning since January 2012, published in DVD boxes, and the program still continues. While one can argue that the stories are presented in the neatly packaged format of TV documentary, making out moving stories so that the viewers can identify with and feel access to the traumatic event, the continuing effort to preserve memories and testimonies by the visual media is very important.
- 8 The original Japanese title of *Nuclear Nation* is *Far From Futaba*.
- 9 From the discussion sessions in which the directors gave a talk and I also attended as a discussant, with the screening of the films at the 3rd Berlin Documentary Forum held on May 30 and 31, 2014.
- 10 In 2008, Hamaguchi directed *Passion*, which was made as project toward graduation, and in 2010,

directed *The Depth* coproduced by the Tokyo University of Arts and Korean Academy of Film Arts. When he was assigned this project, he was actually working on a fiction film, which was to be released as *Intimacy* in 2012, which won high critical acclaim despite its length of 225 minutes. Hamaguchi's most recent film, *Happy Hour* (2015), shared the best actress award among its main cast (Tanaka Sachie, Kikuchi Hazuki, Mihara Maiko and Kawamura Rira), and also won a special mention for the film's script by Hamaguchi, Nohara Tadashi, and Takahashi Tomoyuki, at the Locarno Film Festival 2015. The four actresses are not professional actresses; they all participated in an acting workshop Hamaguchi held. The influence of making the trilogy on Hamaguchi in his fiction filmmaking is rather evident in both *Intimacy* and *Happy Hour*.

- 11 The directors chose not to include the narration in the following two films.
- 12 From the discussion sessions at the 3rd Berlin Documentary Forum held in May 2014.
- 13 Along with the production of their films, they also began livestreaming their meetings held at the Sendai Mediatheque for a program entitled catalogue — *kata-logu* (in Japanese a combination of narrate — *kataru*, and log — *logu*), starting from July 23, 2011 through the entire period of their filmmaking. The livestream image of the twenty-one meetings are archived in the homepage of the Center for Remembering 3.11 at the Sendai Mediatheque (<http://recorder311.smt.jp/series/catalog/>). The media project still continues (<http://recorder311.smt.jp/>).
- 14 Mark Roberts, "Observations on Japanese Cinema after 3/11," *ASEF culture 360* [culture360.org online], posted January 16, 2012. Available from: <http://culture360.asef.org/film/observations-on-japanese-cinema-after-311/> [Accessed 25 Oct, 2015].
- 15 I am tempted to call the body of representations of the disaster the phantom of the disaster, which haunts our memory, rewriting the actual experience of the disaster as something flat, monolithic, therefore easily dismissed. For me, the trilogy is an aesthetic intervention to undermine this phantom, resisting our temptation to consume the spectacle of catastrophe.
- 16 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Johnson, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 96–7.
- 17 Nicholas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, collected and presented by Nicholas T. Rand and Maria Torok, Trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, 6.