



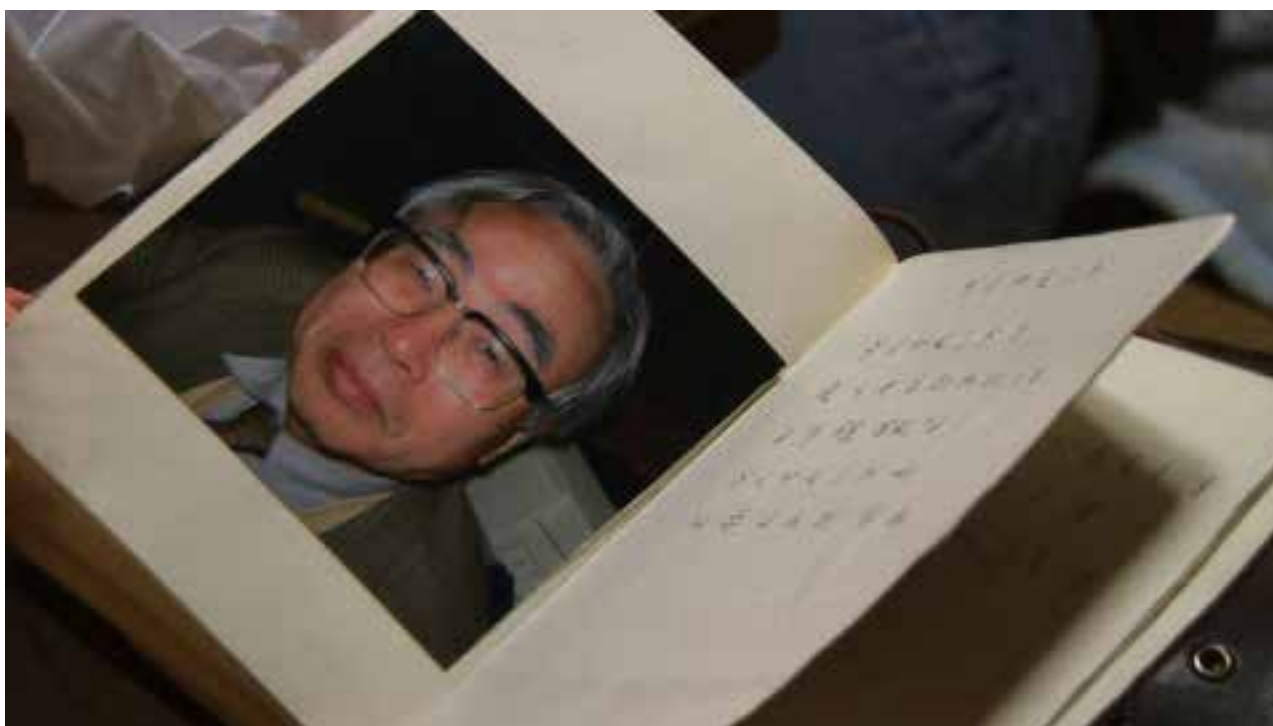
THE SEVEN OBSERVATIONAL FILMS OF SODA KAZUHIRO

BY MAX NELSON

Soda Kazuhiro's new documentary *Oyster Factory* is the Japanese director's second film to open on a close-up of a cat. The first sequence of *Peace* (2010)—Soda's 75-minute "observational film extra" (per its opening title card) about an aging man and woman who spend their modest means caring for the elderly or disabled—catalogues the male protagonist's many adopted strays in a volley of quick, direct portraits. Indeed, cats constantly prowl around the edges of the seven observational films the director has made since 2007, whether slinking into the outskirts of a psychiatric clinic (*Mental*, 2008), standing guard outside the home base of a well-known Tokyo acting company (*Theater 1* and *Theater 2*, 2012), or lingering at the edge of a dock as commercial fishing ships come in from the sea in *Oyster Factory*.

Inquisitive, mobile, silently watchful free agents, cats exemplify the particular values of Soda's brand of nonfiction cinema. Tellingly, their appearances in the films tend to come in the short cutaway shots that have become one of Soda's signatures. These

brief moments of respite fall between sequences that feel like they could go on for hours: lengthy records of tasks carried out repeatedly, step by step; dialogue exchanges that emerge from carefully mixed background noise; meetings, conversations, lectures, and speeches that play out from beginning to end. Soda's interpolated landscape shots, street scenes, one-off portraits, and inserts of elevated trains in motion serve as visual punctuation marks to these sustained sequences. More often than not, it's these brief images—and the chugging, soothingly metronomic sounds that accompany them—that set the rhythm of his films. From the emotionally harrowing testimony of a shattered woman in *Mental*, we pass to the afternoon routine of a nameless street sweeper; in *Campaign* (2007), the film shifts abruptly from the frantic daily beat of an aspiring city council member to the languid movements of a farmer in the countryside nearby; *Theater 2* cuts to yet another farmer after observing a protracted "communication training" class by the esteemed playwright and director Hirata Oriza.



Mental

The subjects of Soda's films are, for the most part, professionals moving fitfully and uneasily through contemporary Japan. Some, like Hirata, are relative successes; others, like the homeless patients that populate *Mental*, barely get by. Most of Soda's characters—the financially pinched couple of *Peace*, the Chinese immigrants employed to dredge up and shuck shellfish in *Oyster Factory*, the heroic, bumbling candidate at the heart of *Campaign* and its sequel—fall somewhere between those two poles. Soda is drawn to misfits and underdogs, and his films often include material that would well suit the political reportage he intermittently publishes in print or on his blog: tense relations between natives and immigrants, cringe-inducing electioneering practices, harrowing stories in which the ill go untreated and the vulnerable are abused. But ultimately, his films are tender, affectionate, and essentially palliative. It's Soda's impulse to console his viewers even as he confronts them with harsh truths, to give them spaces in which they can collect themselves, breathe, and reflect.

Soda was born in Ashikaga, a mid-sized city in Tochigi Prefecture, but he only started making films in Japan after moving halfway across the world. After graduating from the University of Tokyo with a degree in religious studies and instantly rejecting a career in business, he enrolled in a filmmaking MFA program at the School of Visual Arts in New York, where he has lived ever since. While he directed several fiction films during his time at SVA (three 16mm shorts and a feature called *Freezing Sunlight* in 1996), most of his apprentice work was in documentary production. Starting in the mid-'90s, he directed a massive number of films, few of which are readily available, as a foreign correspondent for Japan's national broadcasting network NHK.

The decisive turn in Soda's career came when a college acquaintance sent the filmmaker some puzzling news: a mutual friend from their university days named Yamauchi "Yama-san" Kazuhiko was



Oyster Factory

running for public office in Kawasaki, a coastal city just outside Tokyo, under the banner of the powerful, conservative Liberal Democratic Party. That the LDP had backed Yamauchi—a modestly successful small businessman whom Soda remembered as a happy-go-lucky freeloader—for a pivotal city council slot suggested a degree of desperation on their part. Soda recognized that this was a story to which he could have particularly intimate access, but that, unlike his other productions up to that point, it would have to be shot quietly, patiently, with a single camera and a vast investment of time.

The result was one of last decade's great political documentaries. *Campaign* lacks the visual deftness that distinguishes many of Soda's later work, but the film's stylistic shakiness hardly matters when its subjects are such absorbing, tragicomic figures. Yama-san, a 40-year-old man with the face of a mischievous teenager, comes off as something of a goof, high on earnest commitment but low on charisma and charm. His policies, as far as we can see, are limited mostly to localized bids for "reform," a word he repeats like a mantra at his thinly attended stump speeches. His wife Sayuri is more determined and assertive, and it's a bone of contention between them that Yama-san's bullying campaign advisors demand that she play the role of a dutiful, servile wife.

These advisors demand a great deal of their candidate as well: they manage his schedule, instruct him on what to say (not much), how to wave, shake hands, and bow (deferentially), and where to go (nearly any public gathering). They've also extracted enough money from him during the campaign that, as Sayuri notes at one point, his loss in the race would leave the couple completely broke. As it is, the two of them live humbly; one of the film's most revealing scenes shows them coming home to a sparsely furnished apartment and laying out a rolled-up bed on the floor. It's a moment strikingly out of step with the absurd campaign trappings that fill the rest of the film: the garishly-painted van in which the couple has to ride, taking turns waving single, gloved hands out the window; the bizarre children's choral number that takes place at one of the many events Yama-san is forced to attend; the LDP rally at which the candidate himself, having been deemed too unimportant for the

main array, ends up displayed in a cramped window well below the elevated stage.

Some of the film's most memorable, precisely observed moments, however, have little to do with Yama-san at all. Soda's other major subjects in *Campaign* are Kawasaki itself, the patterns in which its citizens gather and converge, and the curious scenes it constantly generates (one shot shows two public transit workers forcibly squeezing a few passive, resigned commuters into an over-packed subway car). Set against the city's rhythmic, bustling movements and watched by few spectators other than Soda's camera, Yama-san emerges as an increasingly pitiable figure: one whom people would rather vote for than listen to.

That certain people desperately need, and lack, sympathetic listeners is the subject of *Mental*, a film as chillingly serene as *Campaign* is animated. The film focuses on an outpatient mental-health facility where patients visit for meetings and consultations, deal with grim memories, and struggle to find a sustainable rhythm for their lives. Dr. Yamamoto, the stooped, aging psychiatrist who presides over the clinic, is one of the truly heroic figures in Soda's body of work. His practice is an art of listening; when he speaks, it's with carefully weighed and measured advice.

As the film goes on, Soda's own methods increasingly start to resemble those of Yamamoto. Long stretches of *Mental* consist of spoken testimonies delivered to the camera by patients with few confidants and heavy psychic loads: a former streetwalker whose kids call her once a week from the Buddhist-run children's home in which they live; a young woman to whom Yamamoto gave a job filling prescriptions after she was unable to find work; a schizophrenic man who worries that, every five years, he'll be compelled to commit an involuntary crime. These testimonies go on at length; one, the awful life story of a woman who accidentally asphyxiated her infant child, takes up 15 unbroken minutes of screen time. Punctuated by occasional questions or comments from Soda, these scenes are mostly exercises in patient, unbroken attention. But if Soda requires us to submit to these passages, he also makes an effort to treat the discomfort they cause. The short pillow shots—of street sweepers, swans, cats, leaves turning in the wind—that bracket the longest and most painful of the film's testimonies operate in *Mental* much as Yamamoto's replies to his patients: as short, appealingly simple gestures of sympathy, understanding, and relief.

After completing *Peace* (which offered a more gentle elaboration on the themes of *Mental*), Soda embarked on his most ambitious project to date, a two-part, nearly six-hour-long study of Hirata Oriza and Seinendan, the Tokyo theatre company the playwright founded as a college student in 1983. By 2011, Soda was at a stage in his career at which he could identify with the slightly older, highly respected Hirata. He had published two books in Japanese, *Mental Illness and Mosaic* and *Why I Make Documentaries*, and developed a Dogme 95-like list of "Ten Commandments" for his filmmaking practice, including "Do not do any research," "Minimize the crew," "Shoot long rather than short," "Don't chop up shots," and—number ten—"Pay for the production costs yourself."

Taken together, *Theater 1* and *Theater 2* stand as Soda's richest and most complete enactment of those commandments, particularly the last. Money is a constant source of anxiety in *Campaign*, *Mental*, and *Peace*, but it was in the *Theater* films that Soda concentrated most directly on *how* money is actually made. Watched back to back, the two works constitute a six-hour saga of lectures, meetings, openings, negotiations, trips abroad for lucrative inter-

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national productions, and—in whatever time remains—rehearsals. Like Yamamoto, Hirata is the kind of educator that Soda admires: an attentive listener and astute observer, but also a savvy businessman and canny self-marketer. Although Seinendan still struggles to pay the bills, Hirata is the only truly financially successful figure in Soda's filmography.

It's useful, up to a point, to read the *Theater* films as extended tributes to the one filmmaker whose influence looms largest over Soda. In interviews, Soda refers to Frederick Wiseman reverently, and he's long taken the American documentarian's work as a kind of model. Unlike Wiseman's, Soda's films tend to gravitate around individuals rather than institutions, and Wiseman never (as Soda sometimes does) converses with his subjects as he films them. But both directors are indefatigably curious about the processes by which institutions sustain themselves; both look as closely at the edges and peripheries of the places they film as at the centres; and both are drawn to educators, social workers, administrators, craftspeople, and artists.

If one were to sort filmmakers, as Isaiah Berlin whimsically sorted philosophers, into the foxes who know many things and the hedgehogs who know one big thing, Soda and Wiseman would both be archetypal foxes: in Berlin's words, "their thought is scattered and diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves." That definition, which Berlin admitted might well be over-generalized, nevertheless corresponds well to Soda's seventh commandment: to "look at the footage" before having settled on a governing idea for the film, and then "find the theme by editing the materials." But even when they have acquired their themes, Soda and Wiseman's films remain strikingly porous, teeming, and pluralistic.

It's in his two most recent features that Soda has most fully settled into a method that suits his "scattered and diffused" temperament. Soda emerges as a character himself across these films; since *Theater*, his onscreen persona has come into clearer focus, his questions grown more frequent and probing, his tastes and susceptibilities more explicit. *Campaign 2* (2013), which takes place six years after its predecessor, follows Yama-san as he again runs for office, this time against the party that once endorsed him. Little has changed on the Kawasaki election circuit except, it seems, Soda's anonymity: everyone the filmmaker encounters seems to have seen the first *Campaign*. Two of the first film's subjects complain about being filmed again; one staff member chides Soda like a nanny for insisting on filming her candidate's morning round of handshakes ("You're acting like a child"), while another LDP veteran accuses the director of "not creating anything," just "recording my natural behaviour against my will." However, other Kawasaki residents, like the children Soda meets in a public playground or the aspiring stage performer who sells him and Yama-san a packet of tofu, are eager to (as the kids put it) "act" in Soda's film.

Campaign 2 could almost be considered an essay film, at least to the extent that it takes its shape and structure from the darting movements of Soda's curiosity: at times, the film abandons Yama-san altogether for long scenes devoted to other candidates, anonymous Kawasaki residents, or Yama-san and Sayuri's three-year-old son. Yet Soda's personality emerges across the film most clearly in his undisguised fondness for his subject. Since the first film, Yama-san has developed from a put upon sad sack into a heroic failure,

campaigning in the name of a noble cause (nuclear power regulation) that his constituents worry over but, for whatever reason, rarely let affect their vote. By the film's last shot, he's less an object of Soda's sympathy than, like Yamamoto or Hirata, one of the filmmaker's moral exemplars.

Oyster Factory as well grew out of the filmmaker's abiding fondness for his primary subject. For years, Soda and his wife Kiyoko had been visiting the small fishing town of Ushimado to visit Kiyoko's mother, whom Soda had previously filmed in *Peace*. In 2013, on a casual impulse, the couple started filming the daily upkeep of a struggling local oyster fishery where, they soon discovered, several Chinese immigrant workers were about to arrive. (The business' aging owner, who reflects wistfully on its better days, plans to pass it on to a younger man displaced by the nuclear disaster referred to in *Campaign 2*.) After less than three weeks, they had accumulated nearly a hundred hours of footage documenting both the new transplants and the older hands, the latter of whom come off as sympathetic in their better moments, and casually xenophobic in their worst.

In his previous films, Soda found a source of creative energy and freedom in his status as an outsider. *Oyster Factory*, in contrast, could only have been made by a director deeply familiar with *this* particular place. It's for this reason, perhaps, that the film seems even sharper, richer, and more radiantly alive than his other remarkable documentaries. The cutaway shots of the village's coast that fill the film exude tenderness and comfort, as, in a different register, do the fishing sequences scattered throughout the film. As always in Soda's films, work itself takes up large chunks of screen time: we see what it looks like to scrape the stubbornly clinging oysters from the edges of a dredging net, or to pry open dozens of shells in the space of a minute. But much of the film takes place in the moments before and after work: dinner preparations, family hangouts, bedtime rituals. For the first time, the Sodas' own domestic life enters into the film as well, and in a revealing way: periodically, Kiyoko has to struggle to keep a stray cat from slipping into their house.

For Soda, cats have always embodied a certain kind of restless, roving curiosity, and it's been a mark of his artistic personality that he knows when to indulge his own curiosity and when to withdraw. Soda gives his curiosity free rein within the limits set by his subjects' privacy, but it's rare for him to overstep those bounds. Only once in *Campaign* are Yama-san and Sayuri seen in their home; we learn practically nothing about Hirata's personal life across the two *Theater* films, nor, in *Mental*, do we witness any of the film's subjects in states of total helplessness or agony.

Soda's habit of never showing his subjects in humiliating or overexposed positions is less a lapse of documentarian duty than a gesture of respect; tellingly, the two subjects whom Soda chooses to film despite their discomfort and protestations are career politicians he visibly doesn't much respect (and even then, it's only their public demonstrations he records). It might be more accurate, however, to label this trait as a therapeutic device: it's because Soda's subjects feel at ease with the filmmaker that they open up to the camera as trustingly, gratefully, and cathartically as they do. Decorousness is an unusual virtue to celebrate in an observational filmmaker, but then much about Soda is unusual. Some other documentary filmmakers equal Soda in keenness, intelligence, and wit, but few come off as so genuinely caring and kind, able to shift from observer to assuager with such beguiling grace.