

Shibata Gô: Filmmaker of a hybrid Japan

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Abstract

Shibata Gô is a Japanese contemporary independent filmmaker. He made only a few movies and yet unfairly unknown. Until recently, attention was paid only to his second long-movie, *Late Bloomer* (Osoi Hito) in 2003 from a very few independent reviews. However, his first film, *NN891102*, released in 1999, and which is also the work from his period of study, exposes an inspired artist upsetting logics of tradition and modernity. Like many others intellectuals, artists and filmmakers, Shibata's works reflect some specific concerns related to Japan. In which way, does Shibata highlight some of these concerns? An answer is closely associated to the representation of characters as hybrid beings, a common notion of unstable identity related to modern Japan that Shibata shares with filmmakers such as Tsukamoto Shinya. Such a figure emphasizes the identity crisis of the Japanese individual resulted from the war, the defeat and the modernization of the country at the cost of the traditional roots. In order to analyze the multiple aspects of this figure, this presentation will especially focus on the very interesting but very little-known *NN891102*, which will provide two significant ways of studying. First, the problematic of forgetting through a man without identity, without history as well as the country dispossessed of its own History. Second, the question of the individual who sees himself as a stranger with the body of a stranger, involving the process of doubling and projection within the unstable body of the movie itself.

Keywords: Japan, cinema, Shibata, doubling, Nagasaki, A-Bomb

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Introduction

Shibata Gô is a Japanese contemporary independent filmmaker. He made only a few movies and yet unfairly unknown. Until recently, attention was paid only to his second long-movie, *Late Bloomer (Osoi Hito)* in 2003 from some independent reviews like “The Midnight Eye”. However, his first film, *NN891102* (1999), which is also the work from his period of study, exposes a very inspired and complex artist’s mind. From the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 to the dawn of the 2000s, Shibata crystallizes the main anxieties of Japan through a man without identity, without history as well as the country dispossessed of its own History.

Like many others intellectuals, artists and filmmakers, Shibata’s works echo specific concerns related to Japanese subconscious threatening a society built on the ashes of the war and defeat. In which way, does Shibata highlight some of these concerns? An answer is closely associated to the thematic area of the hybrid being, a common notion of blurred identity related to modern Japan that Shibata shares with filmmakers such as Tsukamoto Shinya but in his very specific way. Such a figure emphasizes the unstable identity of the Japanese individual resulted from the war, the defeat and the modernization of the country at the cost of the traditional roots. In order to analyze the multiple aspects of this figure, this presentation will especially focus on the very interesting but very little-known *NN891102*, which will provide two significant ways of studying.

The first subject highlighted in the present analysis is the problematic of forgetting. Shibata’s hybrid is like the Schrodinger’s cat: he exists and in the same time doesn’t exist. He is the product of a forgotten and unrecognized history erased from History. The second subject is the question of the individual who sees himself as a stranger with the body of a stranger, involving the figure of *doppelgänger*, the process of doubling and projection within the unstable body of the movie itself.

I – Traces of no existence

NN891102 is Shibata Gô’s final work from the period he was studying in Ôsaka, made in 1999. The film focuses on Otonashi Reiichi, who survived the Nagasaki’s Atomic bombing in 1945. Since then, he is haunted by the sound of the explosion he believes a magnetic tape recorded at the right moment.

NN891102’s title explicitly involves the tragedy of Nagasaki, referring to the date – August the 9th – and the hour – 11h02 am – of the bombing. The film starts itself on “This film has been declassified”, followed by two pieces of texts. The first one says “These sounds have been retrieved from Postwar Japan”, followed by a shot of the band itself wielding the inscription “NN-八九一一零二”. The second text says “And the tape remains blank”.

These texts echo some Japanese after-war documentaries such as *A Japanese Tragedy (Nihon no higeki)* directed by Kamei Fumio or *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Hiroshima, Nagasaki ni okeru genshibakudan no koka)* both in 1946. The last one has been categorized as *maboroshi* (“illusion”) et *declassified* as a result of, like Kamei’s movie, pressure from multiple censorship acts

ordered by American as well as Japanese authorities. Such a censorship which filmmakers like Ozu or Kurosawa were confronted to directly in their own works. In this postwar period, Ôe wrote in his *Hiroshima Notes* that in an era of frenetic atomic bombs and arms race at the cost of the potential and dramatic mass-destructions involved, what do the Japanese people need to remember?ⁱ In this context, Ôe echoes the film *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*. Speaking of this movie, Markus Nornes says that “Had the suppression of this film been successful, every single other film about the bombings would be different. More important, our very memory of the events would be radically altered”ⁱⁱ.

Shibata chooses to base his movie on a very sensitive subject that so few Japanese contemporary movies still speak about like *Women in Mirror (Kagami no Onnatachi)*, directed by Kijû Yoshida in 2003. His originality is to refer to the Atomic bombing through the noise and in the same time depicts it through an invisible, oppressive and spreading disease. In 1989’s *Black Rain (Kuroi Ame)*, Imamura used similar pattern to portray the latent consequences of radiation through the physical and mental deliquescence of a female *hibakusha* from Hiroshima. In the same context, the sound of the explosion, as the source of Reiichi’s physical and mental deliquescence, depicts this pattern of a latent and invisible evil spreading like a disease in every cell of the survivor and leading him in a downward spiral.

After the Atomic Bombing and the end of the war, Reiichi’s mother asks her son to lie about Nagasaki and so to deny his connections with the tragedy that occurred. However, Reiichi’s youth remains troubled by his growing obsession for the sound of the explosion, leading him to many experiences in order to recreate this sound. But at the cost of his sanity and his physical condition, especially when he gets severely wounded by some explosives he made. From Reiichi’s perception of the events, the memory of the Bomb is this only sound surviving inside him while the tape remains blank. The man gets his body marked by History while this History is manipulated and even erased from the official writings and collective memory.

II – Hybrid being

As a proof of a non-existence, the sound, by existing without existing, crystallizes the instability of Reiichi who doesn’t know who he is himself. This identity crisis is even emphasized by the figure of the Atomic Bombing about what Jean Epstein used to say that in Hiroshima, in Nagasaki, in Bikini, atomic disintegration brings the proof that everything people could have been imagined about infinitely small concretely exists. As a matter of fact, atomic fission illustrates human fission. Disintegration, psychoanalysis, cinema are three ways to access to a second reality in which reason and logic collapse.

Shibata combines those three methods through human fission fluctuating between identity and non-identity through doubling. The main pattern of these splitting bodies and identities manifest themselves through the scenes involving the paper theater that follows Reiichi through time just like the sound as it narrates a parable of his own life.

Through this theater, Shibata evokes Tezuka Osamu’s *Astro Boy* to accentuate the human condition altered by technologies and Atomic Bombing. The story narrated by the theater teller involves a city destroyed by a powerful demon called Plutonium 239.

A fetus inside the womb of his pregnant mother heard the impact of the explosion caused by the demon and was then haunted by this sound at the point his cells become sound-cells, giving birth to a hybrid being.

This theater is also a metaphor of the characters who are doppelgangers of themselves, split individuals, highlighting the enduring presence of the traumatism, the self-locking of the character inside a time disconnected from the reality. A time in which there is no distinction between past, present or future, in which the characters are everyone and no one in the same time. A situation that Deleuze already analyzed in cinema by quoting Fellini who said that “we are constructed in memory; we are simultaneously childhood, adolescence, old age and maturity”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Through these doubling characters, the film makes these times coexist all together. The most illustrative pattern of this coexistence is the many roles often played by one person. For example, the same actress plays both Reichi's mother as well as Reichi's wife. The same actor plays a 60 year-old Reichi and the enigmatic theater teller. At the end of the movie, Reichi as a child and Reichi as an old man appear together on the same frame. Past and future interact in a disconnected present like two ghosts from ghostly times.

As a result, the film itself appears like the inner space of Reichi's mind bodily crystallized in which the reality is nothing but material projections of his identity crisis. So, the film is the retranscription of a reality blurred and influenced by Reichi's fantasies. The object of the film highlights a paradox: the sound as the trace of a memory connected to a traumatism from the catastrophe which determined Reichi. But in regard of a reality tending to forget it, this sound appears like a fantasy. The absence of any material trace of this sound on a blank tape refers to a present of oblivion at the point that oblivion becomes the truth while the reality of the catastrophe becomes a fiction, a fantasy. Reichi's identity crisis tends to materialize through this conflict between this present of oblivion which wants to forget the reality of the catastrophe through a sound enduring inside the hybrid body of the character.

As a conclusion, through a sensitive subject such as the Atomic past of Japan, Shibata Gô evokes the Japanese unresolved schizophrenia. This schizophrenia is literally embodied by material inner projections which involve a material inner coexistence of all the regions of time “from the point of view of the actual present which each time represents their common limit or the most contracted of them”^{iv}. The Atomic fission materializes the three new ways of visualization the inside. In that view, Shibata has strong concerns about Japanese identity built on the oblivion related to Hiroshima's legacy, a legacy of deny. Strong concerns shared by others Japanese filmmakers like Kurosawa Kiyoshi or Tsukamoto Shinya, used to portray people like survivors frozen in a never-ending present without past nor future. However, as a society built on such a legacy, the tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is not the point of their works. The true concern is the process of repression that lets the individual in an instable and unresolved identity crisis.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, coll. Critique, 1985, p.130

^{iv} Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Paris, Ecole Nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, coll. D'art En Questions, 2011, p.68