2021-02-15 · On Screen

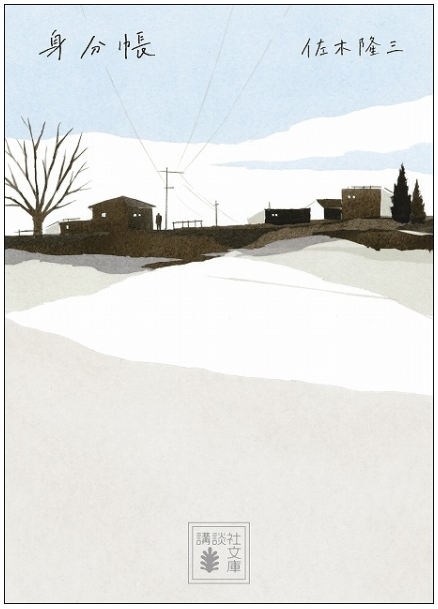
On *Under the Open Sky* & Interview with Dir. Miwa Nishikawa

FALLEN

The theme of finding a second chance (and losing it), of a

transformative encounter, has made its way in the films of director Miwa Nishikawa and in the characters of the widowed husband of *The Long Excuse,* the young medical graduate in the *Red Beard*-like *Dear Doctor*, and the released yakuza of her recent *Under the Open Sky*.

Ms. Nishikawa has commented on, and dealt with, the inevitable legacy of her years as Hirokazu Koreeda's assistant-director (1), expressing a desire similar to that of her mentor, to select stories for which she has an affinity and wants to tell using filmmaking. Those stories are grounded in contemporary reality and explore distinct social classes and settings. While she has written the screenplay for *Under the Open Sky*, it is her first adaptation (a 'true story' book, *Mibuncho*, by Ryuzo Saki.) It lists the torments of a yakuza trying to reform after being freed from prison. The structure of the tale is meticulous and deftly textured, moving from suffocation to comedy. Gangster Mikami is placed/caged in a one-room flat, going out for groceries, applying himself to keep his place clean, and making sure to take his blood pressure pills.



And then there is the story about the yakuza who goes to the employment center and gets asked about his résumé… there is a dream, a truck-driving dream, that doesn't go anywhere. Miwa Nishikawa's directing is subtle and seamless, rather than displaying the craft itself within the narrative, as one finds in the films of Naomi Kawase or Kiyoshi Kurosawa. The cinematography is masterful and the editing allows itself to daringly vary the length of scenes, though at times these are signaled by overt musical cues. All of this makes for a portrait of a marginalized individual trying to make his way into a system that leaves very little room for a margin. Unsurprisingly, Mikami needs his pills as freedom allows him a perimeter in which hope doesn't fit in, until it gets the better of him and he falls.

There is another story being told through Yakusho Koji's performance, a last hurrah for the yakuza code. This materializes itself when Mikami is allowed space, and darkness, at night. There is the manifestation of chivalry when he comes to the rescue of the little guy, the salaryman

persecuted by two hoods that have replaced the traditional gangster figure. Mikami's rage explodes and a formerly reprehensible representation of an eroded onscreen masculinity is released, until the hero quivers and again needs his medication. The second display emphasizes our place as spectator, as we find ourselves witnessing the traditional clan introduction. Mikami has been slighted by the loud noise of his neighbors, two very young men playing video games. As he complains, trash bag in his hand, another man reveals himself, challenging Mikami, mimicking the tone and language of the yakuza. Nishikawa has him follow Mikami outside and frames the courtyard as an arena in which a duel is about to take place. Mikami crouches, arm and hand extended as he recites *his résumé*. It is a history of violence that makes that impersonator flee. And when all has conspired into pushing him back into the arms of his Kyushu crime family, he finds its leader, his aniki, castrated by soft living and diabetes, and an entourage of dim-witted subordinates who have little talent for code and who promptly manage to have the police arrest the lot of them while Mikami was enjoying the local sento. There is another story waiting to be written and shot on the demise of the yakuza figure, not simply as a social figure, but as a filmic emblem that contemporary Japanese cinema has unwittingly emasculated. The story of another pill.

S.

1- And key collaborator at Koreeda's production company, Bunbuku.

The Lone Wolf Conundrum

Under the Open Sky, whether intentionally or not, makes references to a wide range of recent Japanese titles while finding its roots in Ryuzo Saki's novel *Mibuncho*. It shares the same ex-con rehabilitation theme with the manga-to-film adaption *The Scythian Lamb* (2017, Daihachi Yoshida). While only a few characters know about the past of the six strangers brought to a small town in the latter, protagonist Mikami's history (Yakusho Koji) in *Under the Open Sky* is no secret within his neighborhood. This makes his integration into the community a challenge not only for himself but also for the people around him. According to director Miwa Nishikawa, this is one of the major questions she wants to ask through the film: what can and should ordinary people do to help former inmates rejoin society?

Mikami is depicted as a lone wolf, poorly connected to a sense of society and family. Although well-connected due to decades of yakuza involvement, he no longer belongs to any clan. This echoes Ogami, another character the actor played a couple of years ago (*The Blood of Wolves*, 2018, dir. Kazuya Shiraishi), who leads a yakuza/ detective double life, moving around across the borderline and only abiding by his own rules. The wording "lone wolf" is even directly included in its Japanese title 孤狼の血. Both characters take the path of self-marginalization, and feel comfortable enough to stay inside the periphery of the mainstream. Both connote a middle-age longing to run away from the highly ordered everyday life, to reinstall the rōnin legend within contemporary society,while inwardly grieving for the loss

of affectionate bonds. While Ogami dies heroically at the hand of yakuzas, Mikami's life comes to an abrupt end when he's still struggling between his own set of rules and those of society. He had just managed to make a further step into the "normal life" by working at a nursing home. As hinted towards the end, had he lived, this normal existence would not have been any simpler than the one within the yakuza world that he was used to.

Throughout the film, Mikami receives support from people in various sectors, notably his lawyer, his old time yakuza brother, the supermarket manager, and the novelist/tv program director. At the same time, he's constantly on a quest to find the mother who abandoned him at an orphanage as he rebuilds the connection with his ex-wife. Within his relationship network, it seems that social connections are only possible with men whereas women only appear as objects of affection. Here is one thing that the yakuza past didn't teach him: integration into the society is doomed to be a conundrum if the brotherhood is the only way of making connections. Clearly, this is not only Mikami's problem.

Z.

Interview with Dir. Miwa Nishikawa

1- Koji Yakusho has played the released convict several times, including in *The Third Murder* by Koreeda 2017. What is it about him that makes directors want to cast him over and over in such a role?

N: Indeed Mr. Yakusho has played a prisoner in Shohei Imamura's *The Eel*, as well as many roles of criminals and murderers. On the other hand, he has also played many roles of humanistic leaders and

soldiers, as well as great historical figures. He has also played the role of an ordinary businessman. In that sense, I think he is the actor with the widest range of roles in Japan. One thing that Director Kore-eda and I both agreed on was that there is a part of Mr. Yakusho that evokes a kind of unfathomable darkness or madness, and that is a role that he used to play several times before his 40s. We often talked about how we would like to cast Mr. Yakusho again if there was an opportunity for such a role, and in the case of Kore-eda, he achieved his goal with *The Third Murder*, then I invited him for *Under the Open Sky*.

> 2- *Under the Open Sky* was your first adaptation of someone else's work. Could you talk about what the process was for you? How did you, as novelist and filmmaker, come to agree on the final screenplay?

N: I had written my own original stories for all five of my feature films, but after those five, I started to feel a bit stuck in the rut of writing stories based solely on my own life experiences and the internal conflicts that I had faced. I happened to come across Ryuzo Saki's "Mibuncho" at a time when I was wondering if another new story would come out of me.

Mr. Saki's work *Vengeance is Mine* was made into a film by Shohei Imamura, and I loved both the film and the novel. When I encountered *Mibuncho*, at the time of his death and read it, the impact was completely different from that of *Vengeance is Mine*. Instead of a story about gruesome crimes, it's about people who

committed crimes in the past and went through so much trouble just to get back to their normal lives. It's the first time I've come across a story from that point of view that's been portrayed with such care, and it's an idea that I would never have come up with on my own. In order to improve my career as a screenwriter and director, I decided to take on this new challenge of scripting a story based on existing literature.

> 3- Would you ever consider doing a remake or new adaptation of a film such as *Vengeance is mine*?

N: I think Imamura is a filmmaker who has really come to grips with the fact that human beings were unfathomable after the war, and I respect him very much for that power. Nowadays, people tend to think that a film has to portray a human figure that is easy to understand in order to be a hit, or to divide the story and the characters into good and evil, but I think that what a film can express is much richer and more complex. *Under the Open Sky* is not a bloody film like *Vengeance is Mine*, but I was aware of the difficulty and complexity of human existence when making the film.

> 4- The sequence in which Mikami returns to his yakuza brother is short, intense, and merciless. You emasculate the yakuza idea very quickly. Is this your perception of them today, this loss of power and influence, including as a subject in cinema?

N: The laws regarding the yakuza have changed a lot in the past 10 years, and they used to exist in a society where everyone tolerated them, but now they are completely shut out from society. I think it would be better if the yakuza disappeared from the world, but on the other hand, they were the only group that sheltered those who could not live in the public eye. The law told them to quit being a yakuza and shut them out, but the society did not take care about how to let them return to society after quitting. I'm sure there are many fans of old Japanese yakuza films all over the world, but I think that the glamour and the darkness of the yakuza world, which everyone yearns for, has all but disappeared. People who used to be a kind of social evil are now becoming vulnerable as they have nowhere else to go. It's not something I've been aware of for a long time, but I've been doing a lot of research since I came across the novel, and I've been talking to former gangsters about the difficulties of living as a normal person in the society after getting out of the gang. That's how I developed the script.

In Japan, yakuza films have almost disappeared. By a strange coincidence, this year there will be three films with a yakuza motif being released: *Yakuza and the Family*, which is being shown now, my film, and *The Blood of Wolves 2* directed by Kazuya Shiraishi, which will probably be released in August. Films that are about the glory of the yakuza belong to the past, and the yakuza are now in a state of complete disarray — I think all the 3 titles depict this. The yakuza is no longer a figure to admire, and Ken Takakura no longer exists in Japan.

> 5- Your mentor Koreeda came from documentary television, at a time when it was still possible to make different programs. In your film, the doc filmmaker/novelist & producer team embody something very different, something more ruthless and more commercial. Then the novelist refuses to go that way, and deeply mourns the passing of Mikami. What is he mourning? A father figure, the symbol of something disappearing in Japan, or a social system that doesn't exist anymore.

N: Difficult question... (laugh)... I don't know if this is a direct answer to your question, but there is a real life individual for this novel, and the author Ryuzo Saki wrote iy after four years of working with him. At first, that person sent him a mibuncho (identity book) and asked him to use it as the basis for a novel. It's said that in the beginning Mr. Saki himself was fed up with having such a sales pitch again. But after all, it's a potentially dangerous figure who has no relatives and no one to rely on, and if he were to commit another crime, he might do it again. I think he gradually became a person that Mr. Saki couldn't leave behind, even though he was with him to write the novel in the first place. If you look at a person who has done so many bad things that no one cares about him anymore, who has been forgotten by everyone, and if you stay very close to him, he can become an irreplaceable person for everyone. When I read that book, I thought that there is nothing meaningless in human existence, so I wanted the audience to look closely at the existence of people who are often said

to be unnecessary in society.

6- Is looking at Mikami using fiction easier now than doing a documentary on him?

N: I'm not a documentary filmmaker, but a director of fiction films, so naturally I depicted them in the style of fiction films. While it is very persuasive to shoot real people and tell the story based on social themes, it is also something that people in society don't want to see, and I think it is a theme that they want to turn a deaf ear to. That's why I thought that by depicting it as a dramatic film with a certain entertainment value, along with the charm of the actors, it would be easier to reach people who were not at all interested in such things. I think that's the difference between the roles of fiction and documentary. I tried to make it accessible to a large number of people through the form of fiction.

7- How different would it be if Mikami was a female?

N: Female? I've never thought about it (laugh). It would be a totally different life. First of all, I think there is a huge difference in the number of criminals between women and men. Although I just said it would be completely different, the difficulty of starting a new life on one's own without any family or anyone else to rely on when one gets out of prison is quite difficult for women too, even if they don't resort to

violence like Mikami did. I think there is a suffocating feeling of living with your past dragging you down for a long time. Let me think about the question. It's a really interesting one. I hadn't thought about it at all, but I'm sure there would be different difficulties if it's a woman.

> 8- You made your first film as director in 2003, *Hebi Ichigo*/ *Wild Berries*. In your view, has the Japanese film scene become more open to women directors? What significant change have you noticed?

N: I don't think there was any drastic change like in Europe and the U.S. However, the number of female directors is definitely on the rise. In the past, in order to become a film director in Japan, it was necessary to work as an assistant director for a long time. It's the usual course to finally become a film director after accumulating 10 to 20 years of experience. However, with the change in filming equipment, there are more opportunities to present your talent in a more compact way, even if you don't have such a career as a crew member, which I think is the reason that the number of young female directors has actually increased. But if you ask me whether the film industry as a whole is making any effort to increase the number of female directors, I haven't seen it yet. It is true that not only directors but also technical staffs need to have a certain level of accumulated experiences to excel in their positions. Although there are more and more women among technical staffs, I have seen many of them give up the challenging workload on a film set while balancing marriage, family and

raising children. I have seen many women who are excellent, hardworking, and talented retire for the family. I think that if producers and investors do not understand the difficulty and do not change the environment, it will be difficult for women to continue working not just as directors, but also cinematographers, lighting technicians, and sound recordists.

8.2- Is the situation the same for female actors?

N: I think female actors have been able to continue working when they age, even in Japan. But I think there is also the backing of their agencies. Even if you give birth to a baby or get married, there are people who will protect you if you enjoy a position above a certain level. On the contrary, almost all the crew staffs are freelancers. So they have to protect their livelihoods on their own, and in that sense it must have been difficult for some of them to continue. However, as the number of women and young staff members continues to increase, if we continue to be involved in film in various ways, the figures will slowly display signs of change.

9- Several of your peers have made films outside Japan, notably in France. Is this something you would also care to attempt?

N: I think it depends on the motif. I don’t mean to say that I will never

make a film outside Japan, but I was born in Japan and I know only Japanese language and culture. If you ask me if I could write a French home drama, I think I would have a lot of trouble, because even the way to make coffee in the morning would be different. However, if there is a necessity as a motif, I may try to do so.

> 9.2- If you start making films overseas, will they still be stories about Japanese?

N: For now I can't imagine a film without Japanese characters. There may be a film that has both Japanese and non-Japanese.

> 10- Could you speak a little about having casted Meiko Kaji in the film? What was the experience like of directing her? She is of course famous for her 'prison' movies; how would you describe what she represents in Japanese film history?

N: Of course, I know she is very famous overseas. I think she is an actress from anera when she was surrounded by men in a very strict studio system and worked like a craftsman. She is extremely experienced, but once she is on the set, she really works as one part of the filmmaking, very remarkable, and will absolutely follow the director's instructions. She was a very humble actress with the unique strength and attitude of an actor who has experienced such a fast and hard filmmaking process in the past. However, she also has a sense of humor, and although most of her past works were hard roles, Ms. Kaji

has the softness and humor revealed in the role she played in *Under the Open Sky*. She is a charming person that I would love to work with again if I had the chance.

> 11- Many of the Japanese contemporary filmmakers that are famous overseas
> including Hirokazu Koreeda, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Naomi Kawase or Takashi Miikeare 20th Century filmmakers. You are a 21st Century filmmaker. What do you think is the difference not only in filmmaking but also how you look at Japan and the stories you want to tell about Japan compared to that generation?

N: I've never been asked before about this. Difficult question.

I think that directors like Kore-eda, Kurosawa, and Kawase all have a great deal of originality, and I came into the film industry as an assistant when they were becoming active as directors. I was brought up with the idea that I should be an auteur and come up with original film projects. So I think there is probably not much difference with them. Although Dir. Kawase, Dir. Kurosawa, and Dir. Kore-eda sometimes make films based on existing works, I believe that their choice of motifs is based on their individual personalities and philosophies, and in that sense, I take the same stance when making films.

That being said, I think that the nature of the film market is changing, both in Japan and around the world, compared to the time when such directors were recognized worldwide. In the 21st century, especially after 2010, there is a great demand and expectation for films to be economically vital, that to be able to make profits. I think that the era when auteur directors were valued is passing away. Therefore, the number of people who make films from a stance like mine is very small, and unless there are people around you with a strong understanding of your work, you won't be able to continue. I'm fortunate that I'm able to make films in the way I choose, but I think that in the future, maybe I will have to learn how to make money in a balanced way. Filmmaking is very difficult.

> 12- If we could return to Yakusho Koji, he is often perceived overseas as perhaps one of the last of a generation, a last great Japanese actor after actors Ken Ogata and Tatsuya Nakadai. To your mind, is Yakusho the last symbol of that 20th century acting in Japan?

N: I believe that Mr. Yakusho is, in all likelihood, the best actor in Japan today, and I don't think there is any other actor who reaches that level. Dir. Imamura, Dir. Kurosawa, and Dir Kore-eda, and me, we are of different generations, but Mr. Yakusho has been able to act in our films for a long time, he is the kind of actor that we want to entrust ourselves to. So I feel that Mr. Yakusho's reign will continue for a little

while longer. To this generation of directors he is probably the best, and young actors are taking him as a model when thinking about their own performances. I hope that after him another symbol will emerge, and I think he probably thinks the same way.

> 13- In your film, there is a powerful symbol expressed through the yakuza character Mikami. We've mentioned his weakness, surviving with those pills that he has to take for his blood pressure. Often in yakuza films, the yakuza heroes, such as played by Takakura Ken, have heroic deaths. But this time, Mikami simply falls because he drops his pills. And it also seems like the collapse of something, the end of something.

N: I think you're right. In a sense, the glamorous and admirable yakuza films where Ken Takakura put up with a lot of pressure to protect someone and finally dies heroically by cutting into the organization all by himself is not realistic in Japan any more. Culturally it's sad. The beauty of chivalry found in a certain type of yakuza society, that used to be popular, is disappearing.

> 14- How long does it take you between films to find your next subject or story? There are filmmakers like Dir. Kurosawa or Dir. Miike who want to shoot all the time. How long does it take you to feel you are ready for the next

project?

N: Around 3 to 5 years. It's been commented as the same pace as the Olympics.

I've heard about Dir. Miike, how he never turns down any offer from anyone, and that he himself takes pride in directing all kinds of films. Whereas I have to find the subject matter myself, and if I don't know about it, I walk around and research it myself. And I write a little slower than others. It takes me about two years to find a subject and write the script, and another year to shoot and finish it, then one year to travel around the world to release it. So it is at least a four-year cycle.

15- Would it be easier for you to stop making films or to stop writing novels?

N: I think one can stop making films anytime they want. It's very difficult to get a big budget for a film like mine, and the staff around me must be under a lot of pressure to make it. However, if I were asked to choose just one, I would choose film without hesitation. It's ok to not write novels anymore. Writing novel is a method to build up my strength and to keep my writing ability from waning, and to make my films better. I get a lot from writing novels, but filmmaking is a much steeper mountain for me that I'd like to keep trying.

16- Do you like to watch a lot of films between your two projects? If yes, is there one director that you like in

particular? Or you don't look at films at all?

N: It depends on the schedule, but in general I watch a lot of other people's films.

In terms of directors from the same Asian region, I am very much encouraged by Lee Chang-dong and Bong Joon-ho. They make films in completely different directions, but I think they have shown the world the breadth of Asian cinema, so I often find courage in their new works. I enjoyed works such as *Parasite* and *Burning* very much. I recently saw *The Rider* by Chloe Zhao—I haven't seen her latest work yet—who happens to have Asian origins as well. She is active in the U.S. and doesn't shoot with an Asian motif—we are not talking about nationalities here—but I think as a young director she has expanded the possibilities of fictional films. I am inspired by the works of all these directors, and I want to catch up with them and apply what I get from them to make my own work more fertile.

Interview by S_Z

February 2021

Translated from the Japanese by Z.