

## STUDY GUIDE

# I have no memory of my direction by Midi Onodera



### CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Japan & Orientalism	4
Asian Canadian / American Identity	8
Memories, Dreams, Histories	11
Documentary Form & Aesthetics	15
The Film & Video Work of Midi Onodera	19
The Writers	22

### VIDEO OVERVIEW

*I have no memory of my direction* is a video framed as a dream. A voice-over tells of the thoughts and travels through Japan of a Canadian-born Japanese woman, referred to only as “she.” We never see her, but learn that she is a videographer and that we are seeing through her lens, filtered by memory and imagination.

As an extreme outsider who can nonetheless “pass” as Japanese, “she” quickly admits that “she could never belong here ... inheritance isn’t enough ...” Echoing her ambiguous dislocation, the video employs a dream’s unstable logic and relation to verifiable fact. The story moves with dream-like fluidity from one location and set of thoughts to another, often with little explanation. Image and sound lend support and meaning to each other, smoothing over contradictions. Yet some slippages seem deliberate – in playful moments, what we see and hear clearly clash, key figures in the story are only described, not seen, or a story is obviously fanciful – casting doubt on the veracity of the whole.

What is shown is not the “real” Japan, if it exists, but a Japan of the imagination, constructed as much from her/our own cultural references as from Japanese culture. Throughout the video, fragments from the West are interjected: familiar news stories, art, and visually manipulated pop culture imagery. These are touchstones – ways to invent a context for the Japan “she” encounters from what is already known.

Onodera refuses to claim the “real” in this video, but not simply as a Westerner’s respectful retreat from appropriating another’s culture. *I have no memory of my direction* was being made as Onodera’s father was in decline and eventually died from Alzheimer’s disease. In an early scene, Onodera’s protagonist is given a mission: to be the guardian of her father’s memories. Her ensuing struggle and confusion give the story its narrative impetus and another reason for its disjunctions of time, place and logic.

She is on a quest, anxious to fulfill her duty. Like a Zen koan, the paradoxical riddle assigned to seekers, it is an insurmountable task: the inner lives of others are impenetrable, she mistrusts even her own memory, and she cannot navigate as a native. She seeks direction by “rummaging in her pockets,” turning inward to memories, imagination, desires and dreams, and her references from home. Believing in dreams’ superior power to that of waking consciousness, she wants a camera that can record dreams, and control both time and memories,



but she has to rely on her video camera. It soon appears that her “real” quest is to get work with an aspiring Japanese filmmaker. When the camera breaks, this ambition is seemingly defeated.

The second half of the video turns away from the personal and engages in a meditation on images in the world – their relation to war, violence, history and always, memory. Like her camera, the traveller’s short-term memory fails. “Just another tourist” now, she sees the sights of Tokyo, but understands nothing. Stumbling upon an anti-war demonstration, she realizes that she knows war, like Japan, only through images. She goes to Hiroshima, and she visits the Tama River where the occupying Americans dumped Japanese propaganda films. What does it mean to photograph a horror, or to choose not to? Or to destroy existing images? She encounters film images that are necessary – to preserve memories, or to obscure and make them bearable. She becomes a spectator, watching her own footage, feeling an affinity with a stranger on the screen who, she imagines, also longs to know her father and by extension, herself. The layers and levels of meaning become denser and more overwhelming. But now even her father’s photo that she keeps in her pocket is fading. This dream of knowledge – of her father, Japan, and of herself – has surely eluded her. But despite her disorientation, the images of the world have slowly converged with the memories of her family. Her father’s glasses become those of Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa; her aunts *and* a Cynthia Wayne doll survive World War II. While the convergence is not complete, the dream video circles back on its own tail, ending where it began: with the image of teenage girls at the sea, and a bustling Tokyo subway station. Although no conclusion is reached, our dream narrator awakens to another dream day, perhaps to repeat her meditations and wanderings once more.

Anna Gronau

## INTRODUCTION

This study guide offers some ways into the complexity of Miki Onodera's video *I have no memory of my direction* (2005). The video plays with the divisions between autobiography and fiction, documentary and experimental narrative, and calls on its viewers to participate in her construction and deconstruction of Japan. *I have no memory of my direction* touches upon many different themes and topics: family, war, technology, the fragility of memory, the disorientation of travel, the authenticity of images. It is personal and yet fanciful, and playful without being alienating.

Each section of the Guide has a brief introductory essay that lays out some key concepts and historical background. Next, some sample questions encourage you to examine these concepts more deeply through Onodera's video. Finally, a list of readings and films allows further exploration of these ideas, and also offers some possibilities for classroom assignments or film and video programming to accompany *I have no memory of my direction*. While the sections are intended to complement one another, they can also be read as stand-alone pieces. All together, they are designed to reveal the diverse and complex ideas engaged by Onodera's video.

Sylvia Chong

### JAPAN AND ORIENTALISM

“It’s a dream story. One that’s neither a recognizable tale nor a documented truth.”

As a dream video, Onodera’s *I have no memory of my direction* blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction, and between documentary and experimental narrative. These lines are particularly significant because of Onodera’s relationship to her ostensible subject – Japan, a land whose dream images have often played the Other to the Western self, but also the land in which Onodera’s grandparents lived. Japan’s entrance into the Western imagination has been complicated by both Western imperialism in East Asia and by Japan’s own desires to present itself in a manner befitting a potential world power. Hence, artists and even politicians – Japanese and non-Japanese alike – have often evoked themes of exoticism, mystery, and archaic traditions to describe Japanese culture. Within this complex history of representations, Onodera’s video can be viewed as responding to, and even playing with, these presumed images of Japan. Onodera starts with elements of “recognizable tale[s] and documented truth[s],” and weaves them together with the unrecognizable and undocumentable to engage and confound our expectations of Japan. Her images portray both a traditional culture seemingly frozen in pre-modernity, and a postmodern culture reflective of Japan’s political and economic competition with the West.

In a parallel to the nineteenth century artistic movements that brought Japanese motifs into Western painting and music, many twentieth century filmmakers, from Frank Capra (in *Know Your Enemy – Japan*) to Sofia Coppola (in *Lost in Translation*) have also treated Japan as an enigmatic and exotic location, whose culture and language are incomprehensible yet evocative. In these films, Japan is displayed as a spectacle of strangeness, and often serves as a background for stories of Western characters and their search for self. Thus, Japan becomes something of a distorted mirror for the Western subject. Edward Said, a Palestinian American literary critic, has termed this phenomenon “Orientalism.” In Orientalism, Asian cultures become grouped under the concept of “the Orient,” which is then juxtaposed against the West. Studying Orientalism tells us more about the Western cultures which dominated over Asia during a period of imperialism and colonization than it does about the Orient. As Said describes, Orientalism is “a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient” (93). Although individual artists may not be attempting to dominate Japan through their work, the metaphors and imagery they use to describe Japan can reflect a history of power relations between Japan and the West.

A sophisticated, reflexive meditation on Orientalism and Japan appears in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, a film that Onodera names as a direct influence on hers. Visually, *Sans Soleil* takes the form of a travelogue, and its voice-over, that of a letter being read aloud. But the film is far from a straightforward narrative or documentary, for it comments constantly on itself – on how its images are constructed and acquire or lose meaning, and on how images mediate memory and temporality. Unlike Capra's and Coppola's films set in Japan, Marker's film does not simply mark Japan as strange, but asks the viewer to consider the assumptions of film itself as strange: how it substitutes images for memory, stabilizes the flow of time through narrative, and presents its images of the world as true. In a statement that could very well describe the video itself, the voice-over declares, "Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable."

Writing a decade before *Sans Soleil*, French philosopher Roland Barthes came to very similar conclusions in his book, *Empire of Signs*. Barthes understands the Japan of which he writes to be something like a "fictive nation," invented out of a Western desire to read a system into the signs and images that one encounters (3). He suggests that our failure to understand Japan stems in part from an inability to allow signs to be meaningless or empty. As he sardonically describes, "The West moistens everything with meaning" (70). In an analogy uncannily evocative of Onodera's video, Barthes also likens his experience of Japan to a dream, which he defines as "to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it" (6). For Barthes, to be immersed in such a dream has the potential to make our own native tongue and land seem strange as well, such that the distorted mirror of Orientalism collapses in on itself. Together, Barthes' and Marker's critique of Orientalism begins with a critique of Western aesthetics and philosophy, rather than a search for an authentic Japan.

Speaking in the video as a third-generation Japanese Canadian, Onodera is no less "Western" than these other North American and European writers. But the displacement of coming from an immigrant background allows Onodera a slightly different position vis-à-vis both Japan and the West. For one, her dream quest to explore the empire of signs and images that make up Japan is personal as well as philosophical. The video is framed as a dream quest to understand her Japanese Canadian father, whose memories she has been appointed to guard by her grandmother. In the DVD Interview, Onodera calls the video a "dreamscape" that imposes a level of fantasy and fictionality into an otherwise autobiographical scenario. This sets up a tension between a Japan that is simultaneously familiar (and familial), and a Japan that is strange and incomprehensible.

Manipulating her images into a dreamscape, Onodera deliberately alters historical facts and changes pre-existing stories. This is a way of refusing the role of the ethnic or racialized film or video maker as “native informant,” whose responsibility is to teach the West about his or her “own” culture. She is, however, “looking at contemporary Japan through the eyes of someone who is a Japanese descendent, as opposed to someone who lives, is born, and understands Japanese.” Therefore, she is still an outsider to Japanese culture, and her dream quest is more of a travelogue than a homecoming. Japan remains a foreign country throughout the video, even if elements of Japanese culture are familiar to her through her Japanese Canadian family life.

### QUESTIONS

1. Orientalism is a theory of power relations, so works about Orientalism reflect those relations – whether they are critical or supportive of them. Do any of Onodera’s representations of Japan reveal its power relations with other nations? How would we interpret her video differently if the power relations were inverted – say, if Japan were “home,” and the centre of our frame of reference, rather than “foreign”?
2. How does our knowledge of Onodera’s background change how we view her relationship to the “dream Japan”? How would we feel differently if she were not of Japanese descent? Do we have higher expectations of authenticity and insider knowledge from her than for writers and filmmakers such as Barthes, Coppola, and Marker? Would we call Onodera an “Orientalist”?
3. As she describes in her DVD interview, Onodera alters certain elements of Japanese culture in her video, either by “superimpos[ing] a fiction on top of these visual elements” that appear to be simply documentary images (such as the cat cemetery or the visit to Hachiko’s hometown), or by creating new stories that mimic Japanese folktale forms (such as the story of Madam Yoshi and her son Kisho, or of the Bake-sakana who live in the Tama River). What visual or textual markers of authenticity might persuade a casual viewer that such fictions were real? Even if we accept that dreams are neither true nor false, what is the effect of knowing that these stories are fabrications?
4. Onodera’s video features visual quotations of contemporary Japanese popular culture that are familiar to many Westerners: Hello Kitty, Power Rangers, video games, samurai films. With their wide dissemination in Western media, can we still say that such images represent Japanese



culture? Would these images mean something different to Japanese than to non-Japanese viewers? Why does Onodera use these images in her video?

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- Frank Capra, *Know Your Enemy – Japan* (1945)
- Sofia Coppola, *Lost in Translation* (2003)
- Doris Dörrie, *Enlightenment Guaranteed* (2001)
- Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1983)
- Midi Onodera, *The Displaced View* (1988)
- Wim Wenders, *Tokyo-Ga* (1985)



### ASIAN CANADIAN /AMERICAN IDENTITY

“She had always firmly believed that seeing was believing. But surrounded by those who look like her, she wondered if that was true. On the outside, from all appearances, she could pass. If she never said a word, she could hide. This is what spies feel like.”

Autobiography is a mode that is often associated with minority ethnic writers in the West, from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Yet this fact reflects a representational bind: ethnic writers cannot simply represent themselves, but must always simultaneously represent their ethnic communities. This makes it difficult for writers and artists to exercise artistic freedom within their representations – to separate themselves from the personas presented in their works. While Onodera takes an autobiographical tone in her video, she also attempts to create a distance between her extra-diegetic self and the video’s diegetic voice-over self, by never putting her own image into the video and by referring to herself only in the third person. This allows Onodera some creative space to deal with the themes of memory, culture, and loss, and it points her viewers to the construction of identity in her video, for identities, like countries and cultures, are equal parts fact and fiction.

The term “Asian Canadian” (and “Asian American”) is itself fictional, although usefully so. Prior to the civil rights movement, these terms were unheard of. Individual ethnic groups such as Chinese and Japanese thought about themselves as separate entities. But in the 1960s and ’70s, students and activists began to conceive of the broad, panethnic category of Asian Canadian /American as a way of acknowledging their shared past, present, and future. They recognized how a common history of racial discrimination and violence linked these Asian ethnicities together. Thus, the term Asian Canadian /American signifies a sense of shared identity and history among an otherwise heterogeneous set of ethnic experiences. In the 1980s, for example, many Asian ethnic groups participated in redress movements for the forced internment of Japanese immigrants during World War II in both the United States and Canada. Asian Canadian literature that emerged in the wake of the 1970s’ Asian Canadian /American movement, by authors such as Joy Kogawa and Bharati Mukherjee, also dramatizes similar experiences of immigration, alienation, and discrimination.

In relation to Orientalism, one can think of Asian Canadian /American identity as diasporic or exilic, as both belonging to and being excluded from the West. This contradiction has produced the phenomenon of the split



identity. The idea of “splitting” has a long history, echoing African American philosopher W.E.B. DuBois’ comments about “double consciousness,” in 1903: “One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...” (11). Asians, like blacks, have been defined racially by their appearance and thus separated from the white majority. Many Asians and blacks internalize this outside gaze, learning to see themselves critically, as others do. In order to avoid the discrimination that comes with being seen as different, both groups have attempted to “pass” as white, often by altering their appearance and behavior to mimic white Canadians or Americans. The derogatory term “banana,” for example, refers to someone who is “yellow” on the outside, but “white” on the inside. This assumes that being Asian and being Canadian or American are mutually exclusive, and that someone who crosses between the two categories is masquerading or being false.

Some recent scholars and activists have rejected this split entirely, arguing that being Asian Canadian/American is entirely different from being either Asian or American/Canadian. For example, Chinese American writer Frank Chin rebelled against the idea of a “dual personality,” refusing to let others break down his Asian Americanness “into his American part and his Asian part” (xxv). Filmmakers like Peter Wang and Tiana Alexander (aka Thi Thang Nga) have used the idea of visiting one’s “home” country – China and Vietnam, respectively – to portray the difference between Asian and Asian American/Canadian identities. Like Onodera, these filmmakers discovered both strangeness and familiarity in such encounters. By claiming Asian American/Canadian as its own form of identity, rather than a composite of identities, these artists refute the idea that only “pure” cultures are authentic. Asian American/Canadian identities are unique, and arise from the historical circumstances of Asian immigration and adaptation in North America.

### QUESTIONS

1. Onodera’s remark that she is “unremarkable in the sea of Asian faces” suggests that she might pass as a native of Japan rather than a Canadian tourist. However, later in the video, she says that such passing (a reversal of the racial passing described above) reminds her of “what spies feel like.” What creates this tension between fitting in and not fitting in? How does this tension play out in the forms that Onodera’s dream voyage takes?
2. As Japanese American anthropologist Dorinne Kondo commented upon beginning her fieldwork in Japan, “I created a conceptual dilemma for the Japanese I encountered. For them, I was a living oxymoron, someone who was both Japanese and not Japanese” (11). How does Onodera seem like an “oxymoron” to those Japanese she encounters



in the video, in particular, to the taxi driver with whom she searches for Hachiko's birthplace?

3. Onodera's father is an absent yet present figure throughout the video, yet as a second-generation Japanese Canadian, his relationship to Japan is no closer than his daughter's. In the video, Onodera comments, "Here, 10,341 kilometers away from her father, in a place he has never been to – she is trying to uncover a part of him she could barely conceive of." Why, then, does the video focus so intensely on Japan as a site of memory? What symbolic role does Japan play in the identities of Japanese North Americans who were born and raised outside of Japan?

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Tiana Alexander (aka Thi Thang Nga), *From Hollywood to Hanoi* (1993)

Deborah Gee, *Slaying the Dragon* (1988)

Emiko Omori, *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999)

Renne Tajima-Peña, *My America ... or Honk if You Love Buddha* (1997)

Peter Wang, *A Great Wall* (1986)

Wayne Wang, *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985)

**MEMORIES, DREAMS, HISTORIES**

“Can a place become a living memory? What about the power of collective memory and cultural shorthand? If one person forgets, will their memories be somehow cared for by the others? Or would it be like a domino effect of failing to remember? Gradually, over generations, a kind of inherited amnesia would prevail.”

In psychology, dreaming is intimately tied to memory. The most extensive work on this subject remains Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which Freud argues that dreams are formed from “memories which are inaccessible in waking life” (46). Unlike waking thoughts, dreams are not subjected to the same standards of self-censorship and logical consistency, and thus may seem incomprehensible or enigmatic. It is hard to say whether a dream is “true” or “false,” since its meaning lies in whatever significance the dreamer derives from it. Onodera reminds us of this in the DVD Interview when she says, “the viewer has to trust the journey of the dream and be open to the process of dreaming.” The dream motif helps to blur the line between documentary and fiction in the video, tying images and stories to psychic processes rather than to autobiographical or historical truth. Dream metaphors are especially prevalent in avant-garde movements such as surrealist film and experimental autobiography, which play with Freud’s concepts of the unconscious and of free association to produce images and narratives that confound and reject realist aesthetics.

But unlike dreams and personal memories, history is subject to public debate and external confirmation. History acquires its authority from being associated with hard reality, rational thought and scientific knowledge. It is often produced by official institutions such as museums and universities, rather than by individual subjects and their psyches. Some cultural studies scholars like Marita Sturken have argued against a strict dichotomy between history and memory. Instead, Sturken prefers to think of “cultural memory, personal memory, and official historical discourse” as all being entangled in one another (3). Cultural memory, unlike official historical discourse, deals with artifacts like film, video, and literature that may hold great significance without being “true.” It also differs from personal memory, as it encompasses events beyond personal experience. Onodera’s video engages with cultural memory on many levels: not just as the memory of Japanese people collectively, but also as the particular memories of her family, and as a larger sense of world-memory created by the image repository of popular culture. A given image might interact with all these levels of memory and history: at the same time that it is a historical fact, it might also have a place in personal or family memory, as well as attain a larger cultural meaning.

Both memory and history are heavily mediated in Onodera's video by a culture of images and image technologies, a theme that is also taken up by Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. The camera and its products – film, video and photography – become “technologies of memory,” a term that Sturken defines as “not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning” (9). Going one step further, we can see how the camera and its mode of operation become models for the working of memory, so that memory itself is thought of as a photographic, videographic, or filmic process, involving framing, recording, editing, and projecting. Both Onodera and Marker ponder the ramifications of producing and sharing meaning through their camera's images. “I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember?” Marker asks in *Sans Soleil*. In a similar vein, Onodera fantasizes in her video, “If she could somehow record her dreams, replay them when she was awake, edit them into her daily life, she might understand everything more clearly. Illuminated projections bouncing off mirrors, altering memories as they form.” Onodera's musings about dreams and memories seem more melancholic than Marker's, as if haunted by loss – the loss of her father, her father's loss of memories, and her inability to hold onto those memories for him. Dreams, in the video, hold out the possibility of personal agency – “This is your dream, you control everything that happens in it.” They also remain elusive and unstable, however – “She wishes the authenticity of her dreams would remain clear to her in the waking world.” The video returns repeatedly to the theme of dreaming and memory, yet it is more evocative than conclusive about the relationship between these concepts.

### QUESTIONS

1. Not just collective memory, but even personal memories are externalized in Onodera's video. For example, she mentions that her grandmother has appointed her “the guardian of her father's memories,” a reference, perhaps, to her father's failing memory due to Alzheimer's. How is guarding another person's memories different from guarding one's own? What roles do film, photography and video play in aiding or impeding her in this task?
2. Inheritance usually implies the passing of genetic traits or of economic property between generations. But in Onodera's video, one can also

inherit culture, memories, dreams, language, and even ways of seeing. How do these legacies change our conception of inheritance? Can we break beyond the notion of inheritance as being limited to family or generations? How can inheritance become a way of linking the personal to the collective?

3. In addition to cameras, places or physical locations can also be technologies of memory. How does Japan – or even specific places in Japan – contribute to the process of producing, sharing, and giving meaning to memories in the video? And how does the theme of maps and finding direction in the video complicate Japan as a stable site of memory?
4. In many works that blur the line between history and memory, a key element is a traumatic event in the past – for example, Japanese American internment in Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory*, or the Holocaust in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. In these examples, a historical fact that the narrator has not experienced migrates into their imagination and becomes almost personal. What is the relationship between official Japanese history and Onodera’s family and personal memories in her video? Does any pivotal event qualify as traumatic in Onodera’s narrative?
5. When we finally hear the title of the video, “I have no memory of my direction,” in the last 15 minutes of the video, it comes from an elegant woman in her late fifties whom Onodera encounters on a train. Recall that this same woman appears in almost identical fashion in the first 10 minutes of the video, but there, she flits in and out of Onodera’s dream narrative “like an unfinished sentence.” What does it mean that the title phrase is associated with this particular figure? What do you think the terms “memory” and “direction” mean to this woman, to Onodera, to the video? And how does the meaning of these terms, “memory” and “direction,” change from the beginning of the video, when the elegant older woman first appears, to the end, when she reappears?



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- Ali Kazimi, *Continuous Journey* (2004)
- Nguyen Tan Hoang, *Pirated!* (2000)
- Walid Ra'ad, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001)
- Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991)

**DOCUMENTARY FORM AND AESTHETICS**

“She wishes she could believe that the camera sees more than she does. She longs to record the real. She wants to hold it up to the light and see the truth, frame by frame.”

Discussing documentary form in relation to *I have no memory of my direction* is not meant to imply that Onodera’s video should be seen primarily as a documentary. The video partakes of so many genres and forms – autobiography, ethnography, fictional narrative, surrealist dream, avant-garde, experimental – that it is truly a hybrid work. However, Onodera states in her DVD Interview that her intention was to play with the “documentary elements” of her images. Therefore, it is helpful to consider the range of documentary forms and aesthetics that she draws upon and experiments with.

All filmed or electronically recorded images share one important quality that distinguishes them from other representational arts such as painting or sculpture, and that is their indexicality – the real or physical continuity between the sign and its referent. Images recorded with a camera do not simply resemble the objects they represent; the two are physically linked by the rays of light that travelled from the objects to the film or video medium. Early film theorists celebrated the possibility of producing art objectively, without the interference of human subjectivity (in terms of an artist’s brushstroke), but nowadays it is commonly recognized that film (as well as photography and video) is necessarily subjective. The final image is always shaped through posing, framing, lighting, and editing. Nonetheless, filmed images retain a sense of reality that Vietnamese American filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha calls the “documentary effect” (40), and documentary theorist Bill Nichols calls “photographic realism” (586). Once we become accustomed to this effect, we may forget the filmmaker’s intervention and unconsciously accept the image as natural. Onodera, however, constantly plays with the documentary effect, using multiple modes of manipulation to call into question the process of image-making, and keep it from falling into a naturalized state. This allows her to critique not only ethnically or racially-based assumptions about authenticity (see section on Japan and Orientalism), but also the modes of authenticity associated with film in general.

The documentary effect in *I have no memory of my direction* applies to both the direct images contributing to her dream narrative, and to the found footage incorporated into the video. Much of the latter is drawn from the news media, and in particular, coverage of war and other vio-

lent events: the Iraq War and its accompanying protests, and the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway. Partaking in the violence of such events, the camera seems more like a weapon than an instrument of detached truth. This recalls the association of early film cameras, or chronophotography, with guns, and the act of filming with “shooting.” French philosopher Paul Virilio has linked cinema with what he calls the “logistics of military perception,” since both rely on the constant refinement of vision technologies in pursuit of their targets (1). Since the advent of daily television news broadcasts in the 1960s, some media scholars have wondered whether war itself has turned into a sort of film, with televised representations replacing direct experience in the cultural memory of war. Current news media do not rely solely on indexical film, video or photographic images, but also draw on pre-fabricated infrared footage, computerized animation, and other re-enactments to represent war. Such images further blur the line between the news as “documentary” and as “fiction.” Onodera’s appropriation of these virtual war images, juxtaposed against scenes from science fiction films, attacks the question of images’ authenticity from multiple angles.

While Onodera employs methods of montage, found footage, and split or multiple screens that are often associated with experimental or avant-garde film, one of the less common techniques in *I have no memory of my direction* is the use of toy cameras like the Nintendo Gameboy camera and the Barbie video camera. These digital toy cameras produce lower resolution images than digital video, and yet they add sophisticated visual effects completely different from film. Onodera describes using these cameras as discovering “a new way of looking at the world” that evokes both distance and an element of the imagination. As she explains, “I wanted the viewer to look at them [the found footage images] slightly differently, as if it were, perhaps, a dream of television.” Thus, the toy camera images, while indexical and documentary, also signify fantasy and subjectivity and contribute to the video’s dream-like feeling.

### QUESTIONS

1. In many films and videos, both documentary and fictional, the sound track is subordinated to the image track: either the sound is synchronized to the image (i.e., we see a person speaking and hear the words spoken), or the sound explains the image (i.e. a descriptive voice-over, or ambient sounds that match the locale we see). However, there is often a gap or tension between the sound and image tracks of Onodera’s video: events are described that seem only tangentially

related to the images on screen, or the image and sound contradict each another. What meanings do these gaps or tensions create? How are these meanings different from those derived from reading the image track or sound track separately?

2. In realist films, the framing of images helps promote a coherent point of view that places the viewer in a stable position within the story. List all of the ways Onodera manipulates the framing and placement of images, both still and moving, in this video. How do these changes in framing and placement clash with our expectations from realist videos? What kind (or kinds) of point of view do these manipulations create?
3. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov coined the notion of a “kino-pravda,” or cinema-truth, in which film could capture a truth that was inaccessible to the human eye. To what degree does Onodera believe in a kino-pravda? What sorts of truths seem accessible to Onodera’s camera? What sorts of truths remain inaccessible?
4. Onodera often re-photographs previously filmed footage from movies and television using toy cameras, and creating a thickly textured and sometimes distorted image. In her Interview, she describes this technique as symbolizing the work of the “imagination,” but also as providing an extra layer of “distance” between the viewer and the final image. Why are “imagination” and “distance” especially important in viewing these previously filmed images? If Onodera were to re-photograph her documentary-style footage of Japan with these techniques, how would that change the meaning of these images?
5. Onodera’s video is obsessed with the capturing of images as a way to solidify memory and history. How, then, do we interpret key moments in which there are no images to be captured? For example, Yoshito Matsushige’s difficulty in photographing the aftermath of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima; the U.S. Occupied Forces’ disposal of Japanese war propaganda in the Tama River; and the CNN montage in which video game footage substitutes for actual images from the war. Is there a difference between images which are never captured (Matsushige), images which are censored (U.S. Occupied Forces), and images which are re-created (CNN)?



### SOURCES

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- Elida Schogt, *Zyklon Portrait* (1999)
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- Dziga Vertov, *The Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)

### THE FILM AND VIDEO WORK OF MIDI ONODERA

In the more than twenty years that Midi Onodera has been directing, producing and writing, her work has included at least twenty-five independent short films, a theatrical feature and several video shorts. These take a wide range of forms – from dramatic fiction to experimental narrative, poetic work and experimental documentary.

Not surprisingly, given the scope of this body of work, Onodera's subject matter is quite varied. A common thread, however, is a questioning of constraints and conventions, whether genre-related, technological, or societal. The innovative approaches that this questioning has necessitated, as well as the craftsmanship, vision and sheer "watchability" of Onodera's films and videos have brought her recognition and critical acclaim in both art and film circles, and in the various communities of interest that her work addresses.

Onodera was an influential pioneer of "Queer Cinema" in Canada, with films such as *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)* (1985) and her feature, *Skin Deep* (1995), or even her early film, *Endocrine* (1982). Yet her interests and her work extend beyond this sphere. *I have no memory of my direction* (2005) and *The Displaced View* (1988) both arise from the exploration of her Japanese Canadian heritage and identity. A strong feminist viewpoint also informs much of Onodera's work, as does her abiding interest in image technologies and pop culture. *Alpha Girls* (2002), for example, an interactive DVD made in collaboration with three female performance artists, uses a range of technologies, from low to high, to instigate a reconsideration of body/technology relationships in a feminist context. In recent years, Onodera's work has often employed a collage of formats and mediums, from 16mm film to Hi8 video to digital video, including low-end, digital format toy cameras such as a modified Nintendo Game Boy camera, the Mattel vidster, and the Lomographic supersampler. In *Basement Girl* (2000), we see a woman lurking in her apartment and fighting depression, amidst a barrage of images drawn from pop culture, mass media and art, often re-photographed with these low-end kinds of technology. Onodera's current project is a series of 365 short experimental narrative videos shot with such cameras and available for viewing on the Internet at <http://www.amovieaday.com/>.

Onodera's ongoing project seems to be to refuse the false closure of pre-given identities – no matter where these originate – and to give voice to the range and humanness of groups or individuals often dehumanized by prejudice, marginalization or violence. *Skin Deep*, for example, is concerned with exterior markers of gender identity and hierarchical power (symbolically represented by tattooing of the skin)

and the tragedy that ensues when the obsession with these signs obscures deeper qualities of generosity and love. In *Ten Cents a Dance*, three pairs of would-be lovers struggle to bridge the gaps that their assigned identities have created between them. And in *The Displaced View*, the filmmaker confronts the internment of Japanese Canadians, including Onodera's own family, by the Canadian government during World War II.

Her 1988 film, *The Displaced View*, produced seventeen years before *I have no memory of my direction*, deserves special mention because it functions almost as a companion piece to the current video. In both, Onodera examines her heritage as a Japanese Canadian. In *The Displaced View*, her entry into this exploration is her close relationship with her maternal grandmother who, when the film was being made, was already quite elderly. Several important elements from the film find echoes in *I have no memory of my direction*. In *The Displaced View*, the grandmother is a central figure whose imminent decline inspires the search for missing history. Similarly in the video, the paternal grandmother acts as a catalyst, and the failing memory of the protagonist's father represents a link to unknown history, in danger of becoming lost forever. In both works, the protagonist searches for clues to her parents' lives. And both are stories of a journey taken in an effort to retrieve whatever fragments of memory may be found. (In the film, Onodera returns to site of the internment camps, in the mountains of western Canada, where her mother's family spent most of the War.)

*I have no memory of my direction* mixes fact and fiction and, using the conceit of a dream's form, often blurs the lines between these two, while *The Displaced View* appears to operate more clearly as a personal documentary. In fact, however, *The Displaced View* is also a construction. While its stories are true, they are the stories of several different Japanese Canadian families, as well as Onodera's own. Both the filmmaker and her grandmother are seen and heard as themselves in the film, and although Onodera's mother is seen onscreen, an actor reads the "mother's" voice-over. Onodera made this choice because she wanted the role to be read with a distinctly Japanese accent. We assume that we are hearing Onodera's mother, and in this case, that assumption has been deliberately enforced by the filmmaker's casting choice. In some cases Onodera has even re-arranged facts from her own family history. For example, it was her paternal grandfather who was killed in a landslide after being conscripted to work with a road crew. The careful viewer might wonder: do we really know whose family Onodera is showing us? Can we be certain that the stories recounted will form a coherent linear narrative?

*The Displaced View* points to the commonality of Japanese Canadians' experiences of racial discrimination and oppression, as well as to the

way that this history has operated to suppress the particularities of individual histories and memories. In a counter move, Onodera's film seeks to privilege the Japanese-speaking members of her audience. English-language parts of the film are subtitled in Japanese, but the Japanese voice-over is not translated into English. Onodera has explained this choice (in a personal exchange) as an effort to "force a non-Japanese speaking audience into the position of having to 'struggle' with the communication, as [she] had to struggle with the language [her]self." Other struggles are also implied: Onodera's own, revealed in the film, her family's, and those of the Japanese Canadians who were interned.

Like *I have no memory of my direction*, *The Displaced View* is a compilation of stories, memories and histories. Each piece focuses on identity in its own way. In the more recent video, the identity constructed is that of an outsider in Japan, or even an imposter. In the film, however, Onodera makes a link between having to fight for her sexual identity and wanting to defend her Japanese Canadian cultural identity. Not encouraged to learn to speak Japanese, as a child, or to have much knowledge of previous generations, the filmmaker's forays into her history also cast her as an outsider. Her mother's experiences in the internment camp had led her to pursue assimilation with white, English-speaking Canadian culture, and to avoid discussing the wartime era hardships of Japanese Canadians. Her mother's unwillingness to fight for *her* cultural identity is a source of confusion and bitterness that Onodera seeks to resolve in her film.

Despite their many similarities, the two pieces also differ in significant ways. *I have no memory of my direction*, for example, uses a third person protagonist, and plays extensively with the inauthentic – the made-up stories and partly understood cultural markers that contribute to the outsider identity discussed above. *The Displaced View*, however, is recounted by Onodera in the first person, and is the tale of a search for authentication as well as for verification of vanishing history. The distinctive character of each piece comes from both its content and its particular mix of documentary realism and experimental storytelling. The relationship between the film of 1988 and the video of 2005 suggests numerous possibilities for further comparison and discussion.

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