

Unearthing War Trauma in Oda Kaori's *Gama* (2023) and Creating Cultural Memory

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Abstract *Gama* is a 2023 documentary by Oda Kaori, a voyage in the underground unearthing the memories of victims' families and survivors of the 1944 Battle of Okinawa. After briefly exploring other representations of Okinawa, this article analyses Oda's approach to its reality and identity, focusing on oral narration as not just the main cinematic device, but also as the symbol of the importance of a transgenerational consciousness of history. In addition, this study aims to reveal her vision of the underground by examining the features which characterise *Gama* as expository and primarily realistic, along with the contrasting allegorical elements.

Keywords Japanese cinema. Documentary film. Okinawa. Battle of Okinawa. Trauma. Memory.

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1 Introduction

Oda Kaori is a documentary filmmaker known for centering underground atmospheres from various parts of the world in her works, leading her to be one of the major representatives of contemporary transnational documentary auteurs. After setting two of her major works, *Aragane* 鰐 (Ore, 2015) and *Cenote* (2019) in foreign territories such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Yucatán peninsula in Mexico, Oda Kaori decided to return to her native Japan and focus on its southernmost border, the Ryūkyū archipelago, unearthing personal memories of victims of the 1944 Battle of Okinawa, hidden in the *gama* ガマ (caves).¹

As Oda has explored the underground of two very different and far apart corners of the world, it is not much of a return, as much as it is a discovery of a place with a history and a society that shares very little with those of 'mainland' Japan. She explains that as an individual born and raised in Ōsaka at the end of the 1980s, understanding Okinawa and the reality of the *gama*, was not different from understanding Maya communities in Yucatán or the environment of Bosnian mines, as it is a reality that she never had to personally confront (Idonuma, Oda 2025).

Nonetheless, the Okinawan reality and its complexity are part of the history and society of Japan, and it must be recognised as such. This is why the filmmaker seems to have felt a call upon her to shed light on such a marginal, yet crucial part of her own homeland. Indeed, approaching Okinawan society as a Japanese individual appears to be even more difficult than societies distant in space and time from our own, due to historical events, political rulings and social distancing that all concur to present the islands of the Okinawa prefecture as 'different', as some kind of 'Other' of mainland Japan (Hook, Siddle 2003; Gerow 2003).

Regarding how Oda found herself filming the depths of the Ryūkyū islands, in an interview she states that *Gama* (Caves, 2023) started as part of the *Underground* project that was commissioned to Oda from the Sapporo Cultural Arts Exchange Center, consisting of the filming of four underground spaces. At the same time, Oda received a research grant from the Toyonaka City Cultural Arts Center to conduct research in Toyonaka. After finding out that Toyonaka and Okinawa were 'sister cities', she was able to film in Okinawa (Erikawa, Oda 2023). With the *gama* becoming the main part of the

¹ The term *gama*, in Okinawan language, refers to the natural caves in the limestone soil of the islands. These are most known for being civilian shelters during wartime, as well as places where tragic episodes occurred at the hands of both the Japanese and the US army, such as forced mass suicides and bombings.

project, the film emerged as a standalone project. In particular, upon meeting 'peace guide' Matsunaga Mitsuo, Oda and her production team felt that there needed to be a special focus on *gama* and the weight of the Battle of Okinawa on the islanders (Eguchi, Oda 2025).

As for the approach Oda used while handling a reality as complex as the Okinawan one, in a 2025 interview with Idonuma Kimi, in occasion of the release of her latest work, *Underground*, she declares:

even in films [I've made] until now, I was fundamentally participating as a foreigner, and I can say the same about Okinawa. Aside from being a foreigner with respect to Okinawa, I also recognise I am on the offender side. Maybe 'offender' is an extreme word, but I lived in Ōsaka, outside of Okinawa prefecture, and while working I am the party that is pushing things [on others]. (Idonuma, Oda 2025)²

Thus, after *Aragane*, a silent and observational immersion in one of the most prominent Bosnian mines along with the workers, and the experimental and non-linear *Cenote*, a work that embodies the complexity of Yucatec Mayans' cultural memory through a number of voices, portraits, testimonies, music tracks, *cenote* immersions, cultural practices and dances, one could speculate what techniques would be employed in *Gama*, the voyage Oda Kaori undertakes in Okinawa.

Setting *Gama* in the Okinawa prefecture opens up to the discussion of the complex issues of identity and representation that have marked the last eight decades of the Japanese and Okinawan history. However, rather than focusing on popular television shows and fiction films made by mainland Japanese directors set in the archipelago, I will narrow the discussion down to the transmission of war trauma and its weight on present day Okinawan culture, in order to better understand how Oda Kaori moved in a space so dense with history and memory. With this, I will introduce three native Okinawan filmmakers and artists, Takamine Gō, Yamashiro Chikako and Okuma Katsuya, along with their perception of Okinawan identity and history. Through the concepts emerged from the discussion of their works, I will also try to interpret how Oda envisions history and identity in current Okinawa, while showing that *Gama* shares much of their visions and principles, becoming part of a larger narrative of Okinawan war memory.

This is where examining the representational style Oda decides to employ in *Gama* becomes extremely significant. By pushing towards an explicitly expository technique and focusing on the weight of the spoken word, Oda reinforces the communal aspect of sharing

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

experiences, of listening, which is crucial to the concept of cultural memory which will be later discussed. Its complementary point is the value of materiality, which will be explored in the last section. Tangible elements, namely *gama* themselves, stones, bones and objects in which the history of the Ryūkyū islands circulates, are emphasised through the *mise en scène* and through the corporeality of the woman in blue portraying the spirit of history.

2 Visions of Okinawa: Surface Visions

Representing Okinawa as a Japanese individual carries several issues tied to the complex relationship between Okinawa and mainland Japan and the historical and political identity attributed to the islanders in the context of production of discourses and cultural products. In contemporary times, this phenomenon appears in products that emerged during the period of the so-called 'Okinawa boom' of the 1990s, that contributed to directing more and more mainlanders towards the islands.

Here, I do not want to merely discuss the representation of Okinawa inside the Japanese film landscape, rather I want to focus on the transmission of Okinawan war memories through the film medium. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to address, although partially, the intricate issue of the Okinawan identity. Mika Kō (2010, 66) asserts that the troubles in giving the Ryūkyūan identity a dimension directly depends from the modernisation and assimilation (Kō also names this a 'Japanisation') that Okinawa has witnessed at the hands of the Japanese; and then from the US occupation, with its promises of freedom and development soon replaced by repressive policies on the local populace, such as the claim of the best lands for military purposes, suppression of local sovereignty, environmental pollution, social and legal neglect and sexual assault (McCormack 2016; Saeki 2008). For this reason, it is not surprising to see islanders wishing to find their own identity in the past of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, rather than the modern Okinawa, as it is far from the two main political entities that in the last couple of centuries have tried to politicise the figure of the Okinawan local (Kō 2010, 70). However, recurring to the ideal of the glorious past of the Ryūkyū Kingdom has its risks, Kō explains, because the very same history of the kingdom is marked by violent acts, oppressive policies and exploitation of not just underprivileged subjects, but also residents of territories far from capital city Shuri, creating dynamics not far from those the Japanese empire was enacting upon Okinawa. So, attempts to build a 'purely' Okinawan identity are perceived to be problematic as well, as they would be inherently based upon dominating, tyrannical practices aiming to

cancel out various forms of diversity, creating several 'others' amidst the same archipelago (Kō 2010, 70-1).

In fact, the peripheral position from which Okinawans express their voices does not guarantee and has never guaranteed any uniformity in discourses emerged from events that exclusively concern the islands. For instance, feminist movements organised in Okinawa demonstrate a multiplicity of internal identities that can collide or coincide in certain points, and in them it is possible to find the seed of a tendency that would later spread largely in popular culture, that is to say, referencing Okinawan identity in terms of hybridity. In Kō's vision, it is called *chanpurū bunka* チャンプルー文化 (champloo culture),³ and it "allows Okinawa's stigma of foreign occupation or 'impurity' to be transformed into cultural creativity and positive dynamism" (Kō 2010, 72). Despite the noble intention to pay homage to the various roots that come together to create the rich cultural substrate of the Ryūkyū archipelago, this ended up generating a popular representation of the island as a *locus amoenus*, exotic and comforting, and of its inhabitants as perpetually happy islanders who enjoy relaxing on the beach with songs and dances, while erasing the hard past of the island and the identity issues tied to the complicated relationship with both Japan and the United States.

In a seemingly opposite way, in public consciousness, the representation of Okinawa is associated to events such as the Himeyuri tragedy, examined by Linda Angst in a 1997 article, along with the collective perception of it within local residents.⁴ According to Angst (1997, 100-1), these girls have become the main symbol of postwar Okinawa, further adding that several movies have been made about the event, and that most Japanese of the postwar generations are solely aware of the Battle of Okinawa as a consumer would be, through the romanticised and sensationalised image both of the girls

3 *Chanpurū* is a typical Okinawan dish featuring a mix of tōfu with various types of vegetables, meat or fish. Its name comes from a Malay word, *campur* (mix), pronounced 'chanpoor'.

4 In March 1945, more than two hundred students and eighteen teachers of the Okinawa Women's Normal School and the First Prefectural Girls High School in Shuri received order by the Japanese military to join the medical unit in Haebaru Army Field Hospital and other hospitals in the area, in order to take care of injured soldiers, remove soldiers' corpses from the caves and generally carrying supplies in and out of the caves. Despite being given distressing tasks at such a young age, the girls dutifully performed what was expected of them. In May, the Japanese left Shuri, and the students followed them even when the army was ready to surrender. However, soon the girls were left to defend themselves, while soldiers continued to hide in the caves even prohibiting access to civilians. Many girls were victims of an attack in the Kyan peninsula, others were bombarded while hiding amidst the debris, others were killed on the beach, and only five out of a group of fifty-one women survived the bombing of a cave where they had found refuge. The term 'Himeyuri' refers to all the girls involved in this tragic episode, with respect to the purity and innocence represented by the lily.

and the war (Angst 1997, 103). However, in this case it appears that the historical and political consciousness has been modelled exclusively by products that promote an idealised and romanticised – and quite flattened – image of the victims. So, for Hook and Siddle (2003, 12), popular memory on the one hand focuses on the victims, symbolised by the young Himeyuri nurses, while on the other hand, it opens to perturbing questions about the Japanese military atrocities towards the islands' civilians.

It is this comprehensive concept of popular memory at the base of Matsunaga's work, and it constitutes the core of the narrative through which Oda guides the camera inside the *gama*, bringing to light places that had never been shown in prior representations of Okinawa. Similarly, I intend to center this exploration of the films on Okinawan transmission of war memories through films that draw inspiration from some kind of personal connection to the war trauma, not limited to documentary modes of expression, but generally anchored in reality.

Amidst the various representations and personal re-elaborations of Okinawan history, one worthy of mention belongs to Okinawa-native filmmaker Takamine Gō, born in Ishigaki and raised in Naha. According to Ma Ran (2019, 174), he develops a 'theory of landscape' that she describes as

one that seeks to configure 'a self-speaking island' by turning away from the representational tropes consisting of, for instance, 'the base, the blue sea, and the market', in order to resist the imaginary of a 'symbolized Okinawa', namely the consensual articulations apropos Okinawa-on-screen, such as those of the nationalist and the tourists (including the leftist intellectuals).

This is indeed what seems to be the core principle which Takamine follows in the making of his debut work, *Okinawan Dream Show* オキナワン・ドリーム・ショー (1974), a documentary film shot in 8mm throughout several years, that Ma describes as a compound of long takes and long shots of mundane daily life where women, men, children and elderly people are nothing but passing figures. The environments that Takamine shoots, both urban and rural, do not show any specific sign that might remind the spectator the geopolitical conditions and historical and social transitions occurring in Okinawa in those years (Ma 2019, 176). Aaron Gerow (2003, 297) states that Takamine's work is valuable because it "successfully challenges the dominant representations of Okinawan identity [...], using representational strategies to contest and reshape definitions of that identity". What Takamine aimed to achieve in *Okinawan Dream Show* is a sort of cleansing, as he admits in an 2003 interview with Nakazato Isao. He states

I did not want to be a passerby while I was staring at the landscape with my 8mm camera, I wanted to try to take in the smell of death of the landscape. The 8mm camera is a visual medium, but just by looking at it I wanted to smell it. I mean, during the war, the soil of Okinawa was almost completely covered by corpses, and after the war, with the reconstruction, many things were sorted out, such as the Himeyuri tower. But those bodies were normally in the scenery too... And the stories I heard from my parents felt so real, normal, when they trampled on those dead bodies while they were running, escaping. So, I thought that the souls of the dead, rather than the spirits of the dead, were wandering around without having been tidied up. With that, with my camera I wanted to suck up all of that scenery. I think I used that camera like a vacuum cleaner back then. I wanted to film that landscape, not just giving meaning to it, but like a vacuum cleaner, I wanted to take in that smell. For that reason, you film for as long as possible. (Nakazato, Takamine 2003)

Therefore, in Takamine's nostalgic documentary, the recent history of Okinawa feels somehow tangible, yet invisible, lying beneath the surface of the sceneries Takamine decides to shoot, and in the later sections of this article I will explain how Takamine's vision of filmmaking as a 'cleansing' tool can be found in the concept *Gama* is based upon.

Another artist that focuses on reinterpreting the past of Okinawa is Yamashiro Chikako, who has also worked as art designer in Takamine Gō's 2016 work, *Hengyoro* 変魚路 (Queer Fish Lane). In her work, it is possible to perceive the complexity of Okinawan reality from a different perspective. Born in 1976, Yamashiro Chikako belongs to a generation that came later than that of Takamine, fairly distanced from war memories and the reversion to Japanese sovereignty. Yamashiro notably focuses her artistic endeavour on the memory of the Battle of Okinawa, exploring and 'appropriating', as Ma Ran notes, "how Okinawa's war memories and experiences could be passed down and shared not only transgenerationally but also translocally and transregionally" (Ma 2019, 189).

Ma analyses two works where Yamashiro deals with memory, *Anata no koe wa watashi no nodo wo tōtta* あなたの声は私の喉を通った (Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat, 2009) and *Tsuchi no hito* 土の人 (Mud People, 2016). *Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat* is a seven-minute long video where the spectator is faced with the artist's face at a three-quarter angle. Yamashiro mimes the words that are being pronounced by a man, in a voice-over. He says that at age nine, during the Saipan battle, he witnessed his own family's suicide. The face of the man is now projected on Yamashiro's face, and the artist is taking longer and longer breaks, as she hears the man's

voice breaking down at the pain of going through such a harrowing memory. When the man says he saw them jumping into the ocean, she stops as well, and starts crying, unable to proceed with the act of miming (Ma 2019, 190). Joshua Chambers-Letson finds that this is the point where Yamashiro recognises the impossibility of feeling the sense of loss he felt at that time. He also adds that this moment of non-equivalence is productive precisely because it reveals the “the tenuousness of our links to those who have come before, links that are structured by incommunicable caesura in our experiences” (Chambers-Letson 2014), which I will demonstrate to be a crucial matter in Oda Kaori's work as well.

In her analysis of this work, Ma focuses on the projection of the man's face on that of the artist and, coming to the same conclusion as Chambers-Letson (2014), she circles back to the concept of ‘appropriation’, and states that her performance,

staging the process of appropriation, is about the split roles of the ‘self/selves’ that registers the perpetual, fluid position/role-shifting in between that of an enunciating subject and that of an embodied spectator, between not-knowing and knowing, moving in between the past, the present, and the future. (Ma 2019, 191)

In a similar fashion, a 2024 documentary by Naha-native Okuma Katsuya, called *Hone wo horu otoko* 骨を掘る男, known internationally as *Close to the Bone*, grapples with the ‘inheritance’ of memories, but through the perspective of someone personally involved in the search for remains of the victims of the Battle of Okinawa (Okada 2025). Okuma, alongside Gushiken Takamatsu, a volunteer *gamafuyā*,⁵ is searching for the remains of his grandmother's sister, a war victim, but also for her image in various video archives, facing the question of whether it is possible to mourn a person that one has never met. Okada Yumiko, in her article on *Close to the Bone*, points out two main themes that emerge in the film which I believe to be at the core of *Gama* as well: one is the supposed impossibility of representation, and the other is the transmission of war memories. Her analysis touches on Okuma's attitude towards the representation of death, trenches, archived video footage, and also on Gushiken's behaviour, which she defines as ‘incredibly restrained’, mentioning how during the recovery of some bones, he carefully examines the information he had gathered, expresses observations regarding the nature of the bone, hypothesising whether other pieces of bone are missing, or the reasons for the individual's death, always adding reservations and

5 In Okinawan language it translates to ‘cave digger’, and it is the term Gushiken refers to himself with.

stating that it is only possible to imagine, as he continues digging in the earth. This is, in fact, not an abstract process, but a very active one, as for Okada (2025, 122), it

highlights the importance of continuous practice, standing before the (im)possibility of representation, it does not focus on whether representation is possible or impossible, but rather on continuing to look at what is before our eyes.

The second point, concerning the transmission of memories, is based on Yakabi Osamu's concept of 'relearning' expressed in his book *Okinawasen, beigun senryōshi wo manabinaosu: kioku wo ika ni keishō suru ka* 沖縄戦、米軍占領史を学びなおす：記憶をいかに継承するか (The Battle of Okinawa and Re-learning the History of the US Military Occupation: How to Inherit Memories), which the director himself claims to have read multiple times during the five years of preparation for the film (Okada 2025). For Yakabi (2009, xii), 'inheriting' means 're-learning', and according to Okada, the director structures the film around Yakabi's points of sharing and commemorating the stories of the Battle of Okinawa, the perspective of 'becoming' Okinawan, and the fusion of the 'big narrative' of the world history and the 'small narrative' of personal family history (Okada 2025, 123). Indeed, Okuma's work responds to Yakabi's question of "how we, while acknowledging of our position of non-experiencers, can acquire a sense of connectedness with the Battle of Okinawa through collaboration with those who did experience it" (Yakabi 2009, ii). Okuma meshes the 'big narrative' of the Battle of Okinawa with his own family history, listens to the 'voices' from the bones of the victims, the archived experiences, so that the very act of filmmaking allows him to come into contact with other people's stories (Okada 2025, 123), and this very 're-learning' of the history of Okinawa through collaborative work makes him an Okinawan in Yakabi's perspective. In fact, this foregrounds the discussion of *Gama* as a work focused on unearthing war memories through the exposure to a number of experiences which, in their own way, blend 'big' and 'small' narratives, offering a similar perspective on representation, the meaning of filmmaking and mourning the death of strangers.

3 Representing Death and the Places of Memory

While discussing the style, I will try to address the issue of representation of the unrepresentable, as well as how Oda Kaori deals with death and sites of traumatic memory in this work. Oda Kaori notably employs a different modality of representation for each reality she immerses herself into, as we see with the richly visionary and experimental style that characterises *Cenote*, in striking contrast with the observational, minimalist techniques displayed in the previous work, *Aragane*. *Gama* represents another shift for Oda, who goes in the direction of a historical documentary, with a more distinctly informative and expository fashion than the previous works. This time, Oda makes use of a guide, to whom she leaves the responsibility of telling the stories of islanders and their families that, in order to escape bombings and American attacks during the Asia-Pacific war, found refuge in *gama*. As the background of these stories, shot mostly in one take, there are the rocky surfaces of the cave standing behind the man who is telling these stories, Matsunaga Mitsuo, the only character in the film along with a silent woman with a blue dress. The study will now focus on Matsunaga's role and the value of oral narration of such histories and lives in a documentary, while examining the humanity of Oda's approach.

As a matter of fact, it is necessary to clarify that despite looking plainly expository, this documentary has a deeply subjective and creative angle that, in its simplicity, characterises the reality Oda Kaori engages with. She steps back and lets the guide speak, she hardly intervenes, and gives complete attention to the narration Matsunaga engages in. This unassuming and humble attitude, while not extraordinary for Oda, feels particularly careful, possibly due to discussing a historical tragedy more directly than ever before. It is not the first time Oda faces the reality of death: in *Cenote* we listen to accounts about people and children disappearing into *cenotes*, we see sequences of rituals of Día de los Muertos, we see graphic images of cattle being slaughtered for a meal, in *Aragane* we hear workers talking about having risked their lives in tunnel explosions. However, in *Gama*, the idea of death seems to intimidate the director, as she probably sensed the inherent impossibility to directly grapple with others' trauma.

Gama opens with a visually evocative scene, that is an overexposed image of the sea, appearing white in colour, followed by a slow zoom-out, which reveals the rocky internal surfaces of a cave and the shape of a woman looking at the sea [fig. 1]. She is standing in front of an opening, from which all that light effuses, giving life to a vivid contrast with the deep, dark hues of the inside of the cave. Already from this point, Oda's style appears as dry and minimalistic, with a propensity for fixed shots and limited camera movements and generally avoiding

close-up shots and point-of-view shots. This already seems to suggest the way Oda will face the stories guarded in the *gama*, a way in which it is also possible to read the importance of the time in which she sets the film, that is to say a dynamic present that gives prominence to the act that characterises *Gama*, the act of narrating. This is where the issue of representation becomes crucial, wondering how those events, those people and that pain are shown or told in a film, and how the experience of this trauma reaches the spectator.

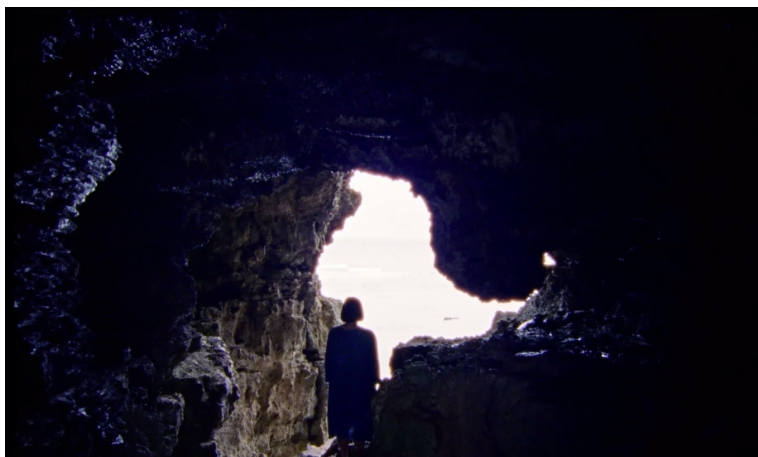


Figure 1 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

The role of narrator, as previously mentioned, is bestowed upon Matsunaga Mitsuo, who self-describes as a *heiwa gaido* 平和ガイド (peace guide), as he has been working as such since 1988. In his personal site, Matsunaga explains that he became a peace guide after participating in an operation of recovery of human remains. He claims to have been invited by a former head nurse of the Third Surgery Cave of the Okinawa Army Hospital, who had the intention of passing down to the next generations the memory and the experience of the Okinawa battle.⁶

Gama, then, is a film that presents itself not only as a way to tell and convey the stories and memories of war victims, but also as a way to problematise the relationship between history and the activities that we associate to it in the present. Without making use of archive footage, and only leveraging the imaginative power of words and storytelling, in *Gama* Oda manages to center both human

⁶ *Okinawa no gama, senseki annai* 沖縄のガマ・戦跡案内 (The *gama* of Okinawa, War Sites Information). <https://www.heiwa-guide.net/>.

resilience and fragility. In *Gama* there are no reenactments of the events Matsunaga talks about, and how to design its representation in documentary becomes a central issue. According to what Bill Nichols states in *Representing Reality*,

The mortality of the body presents a continual challenge to documentary. It eludes all strategies of representation. It is, in the crucial moment of its occurrence, unrepresentable. Vital signs, representations, provide us with a boundary across which life can pass surreptitiously, but they remain indifferent to the fate of the values we assign or the feelings we attach to it. Death is the deduction or cessation of something within, unseen. (Nichols 1991, 236)

The body referred to in *Gama*, the body of victims, is represented in its absolute absence, and the reenactment only happens in the mind of the spectator, calling upon their active participation, similarly to what Okuma, alongside Gushiken, does in *Close to the Bone*, where the oral narration of factual events, reading aloud soldiers' names, "opens up a dimension where a new imaginative power unfolds" (Okada 2025, 132). Death and its representation are generally avoided in documentary, as Vivian Sobchack explains in an essay called *Inscribing Ethical Space*, documentaries are "indexical in code and function, they observe the social taboos surrounding 'real' death and generally avoid reference to it" (Sobchack 1984, 286). For Sobchack, who faces the different modes of representation in documentary focusing on the ethical issues,

documentary space is indexically constituted as the perceived conjunction of the viewer's life-world and the visible space represented in the text; the agency of this conjunction is the viewer's gaze, informed by cultural and ethical knowledge, and inscribed as ethical and subjective action. (Sobchack 1984, 294)

In the first place, the spectator's participation is activated from the place where the film is set, and from which the film takes its title. *Gama* could be defined as what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, that is to say "remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" (Nora 1989, 12).

In an article analysing the work of peace guides, Kitamura Tsuyoshi (2006, 56) explains that *gama* are often defined as a *shukuzu* 縮図 (microcosm), *ikishōnin* 生き証人 (living testimony) or even *kataribe* 語り部 (narrator) of the battle of Okinawa, and that today they have become pilgrimage destinations, with the aim of remembering history and reflecting on the concepts of war and peace. For Pierre Nora (1989, 12), *lieux de mémoire* are envisioned with the

feeling that spontaneous memory, that makes us able to remember organically these fragments of history, will wane. Without setting up anniversaries, celebrations, archives that allow these memories to crystallise, they would either disappear or be irremediably damaged and transformed by the eternal flux of time, and this very necessity to protect them, materialise them and take these fragments away from the 'movement of history' is what gives birth to *lieux de mémoire*.

In the *gama* as *lieux de mémoire*, we have access to not only a narrative, but to an experience where the Okinawan subject becomes protagonist, as opposed to the hegemonic tendency in Japanese politics to overlook the islanders' lived experience. I suggest that Oda's choice to place the narrator [fig. 2] perfectly centered in a wide shot inside a *gama*, enhancing his figure precisely in the illuminated portion of the cave background, alludes to the central role that she confers to the experiences of families and victims.

Ilona Hongisto in her work *Soul of the Documentary*, states that in social or political documentaries shot composition is to be considered highly meaningful because "the frame regulates the relationship between the body and its environment, and thus plays a part in how that relationality is experienced in the documentary" (Hongisto 2015, 123). Immediately following this shot, there is a shot focused on some stones on the ground, with some names written on the surface, and after ten seconds, the screen cuts back to Matsunaga. Sobchack too, pays attention to shot composition and the *mise en scène*, as that is the place where the ethical gaze of the documentary shines through, stating that the image "is inscribed by the mark of a steady camera, placed in a generally measured distance from its visual object, and by smooth technical and physical activity" (Sobchack 1984, 297).



Figure 2 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

Next, Matsunaga is shot in a different environment, his whole body is shown slightly decentered in the illuminated cave. Like the previous one, the shot is fixed and the light pours over his figure making the rough edges of the cave stand out. He starts talking about the events that occurred in Chibichirigama, in the Yomitan village: the United States Army arriving in Chatan and in Yomitan, the islanders taking refuge in Chibichirigama. Among these residents there was a woman named Chibana, who went outside so as to prepare food for her family after the attack, but soon came back after the sighting of some American soldiers on hill, to alert the other refugees. Upon hearing this, those who were hiding in the cave armed themselves with bamboo sticks, went outside and started their counterattack. Matsunaga adds that there were mothers encouraging their kids to attack, arming them with sticks. But then, the American response: a machine gun attack that instantly killed two people, whose bodies were to be carried again inside the cave. The United States commanded them to surrender, but everybody refused. At that point, those hiding in the *gama* came up with the idea of a mass suicide, that actually took place the following day, 2 April. Matsunaga tells that out of the hundred and fifty people hiding in that *gama*, eighty-three died by suicide. Some of the survivors state that they did not really want to die, but were too ashamed to admit it.

This is the first example of narration we see in *Gama*. Matsunaga keeps a plain expression, has a laconic style, a neutral tone, and relates the events in a factual manner, sometimes adding details like the American landing taking place at eight thirty in the morning, and a comment uttered by the American journalist and war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who supposedly joked that Americans could keep a camera in their hand even while turning their back to the enemies. Therefore, as much as his chronicles are uttered in a rather plain tone, Matsunaga does not hide some of his personal observations in specific points. For example, after reporting Pyle's remark that they could film the Japanese army even with their backs turned to them, he adds a personal judgment calling him *gōgō shiteru shinbun kisha* 轟々してる新聞記者, a "journalist who spoke so clamorously" (05'17"). Or, after relating the Chibichirigama mass suicide, he comments, as if with regret, that if only someone had had the courage to admit that they did not intend to die like that, maybe all of them would have survived.

So, it appears clear from the very beginning that in *Gama* there is no claim to tell history from a purely objective point of view, but to bring forth a collection of experiences that have long been disregarded by the official history that the Japanese and the United States government have organised surrounding the war discourse.

For Stella Bruzzi (2006, 17),

the fundamental issue of documentary film is the way in which we are invited to access the 'document' or 'record' through representation or interpretation, to the extent that a piece of archive material becomes a mutable rather than a fixed point of reference.

In *Gama*, spectators are invited to access the historical material hidden in the underground through interpretation of the stories and experiences that Matsunaga narrates, reworking them through their personal imaginative power aided by Oda's stylistic choices. It is in this hidden space that the memories of a community whose voice has long been silenced are preserved, memories that Matsunaga, along with Oda, wants to bring back to light. The spectator, faced with *Gama*, approaches the film primarily as a collection of individual experiences and stories, creating a connection with history and a portion of history they had probably never had the opportunity to face before. In fact, the significance of orality in *Gama* is strictly linked with the power of the collective, and the process through which diverse generations come together, from survivors to the younger people for whom war is nothing but distant imagination. In this sense, Roxana Waterson discusses the anthropologic importance of the transmission of personal memory through film, stating that

if memory, at the moment of sharing, is an event, linking teller and listeners, the sharing of memories simultaneously promises them a longer, collective life. The event, then, is also the starting-point of a trajectory that has a chance to endure in collective memory. (Waterson 2007, 66)

However, rather than the term 'collective memory', in this case it would be pertinent to use the term 'cultural memory', following Jan Assmann's framework. According to Assmann, cultural memory is one of the two dimensions that constitutes collective memories, along with communicative memory. While communicative memory is based exclusively on daily interactions, cultural memory is characterised by a certain distance from the ordinary and by fixed points that stay intact with the passage of time, in other words, events of the past. Also, he observes that the memory of such fixed points is maintained through a certain cultural education that comprises production of texts, rites or monuments, and institutional communications, in which are included recitation, practice or observance (Assmann 1995, 126-9).

In this context, the work of Matsunaga Mitsuo – and more largely, of peace guides – is definitely relevant. Kitamura Tsuyoshi (2006, 59) affirms that starting from the late 1980s, such peace guides have

contributed to the diffusion of new courses regarding battlefields. Their role consisted in accompanying students on school trips in battlefields or cemeteries. According to Kitamura (60), the most interesting point is that in most cases these guides belong to a generation born in the postwar period, and we find that this is Matsunaga's case. As for the emergence of peace guides, he explains that guides started naming themselves as such in the late 1980s, but their activities around military bases and major war sites had started in the previous decade. Between 1986 and 1987, local governments started the implementation of a campaign aimed at encouraging as many residents as possible to become peace guides, offering courses on the study of military bases and strategies, with not just theoretical classes on the Battle of Okinawa, but also practical work on US bases, where also journalists and veterans participated. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, tourism and school trips from mainland Japan towards Okinawa sensibly increased, to the point that the number of guides was not sufficient for the demand (Kitamura 2006, 59-60). As previously stated, Matsunaga himself started working as a guide in those same years, specifically for mainland Japanese tourists.

While watching the movie, there is the feeling that Matsunaga is doing nothing far from his own work, with the difference that he is now in front of a camera: it must be noted that he speaks only Japanese, addressing his usual target audience of mainland Japanese. In his way of standing before the camera, we could read the intention of addressing an audience that has never visited Okinawa or has never had any meaningful connection with that part of the archipelago, unable to tackle episodes that define the identity and the society of a land that Japan, as a State, has such a complex relationship with. Therefore, it is possible to say that working as a peace guide for over three decades, Matsunaga feels compelled to act as a mouthpiece for these individuals' stories, highlighting his role in the larger contemporary society, traceable to Pierre Nora's concept of a new historian, who emerges so as to "confess the intimate relation he maintains to his subject. Better still, he is ready to proclaim it, deepen it, make of it not the obstacle but the means of his understanding" (Nora 1989, 18).

Indeed, it is interesting to notice that what connects Matsunaga so deeply to the Battle of Okinawa is not some family knowledge or a direct experience to the 1944 events. In a specific section of the film, from 37'40" to 42'34", inside a *gama* Matsunaga tells his own story to presumably three archaeologists, and the woman in blue is there too. He introduces himself in a simple fashion, saying that he was born in 1953, and that he came into contact with these historical events while he was working as a taxi driver. There, he met Ishigaki-native Gushi Yae, who had been head nurse of the Third Surgery Cave of the Okinawa Army Hospital, and who had been mainly dealing with

recovery of bodies. As previously mentioned, he tells the women in front of him that after participating in recovery activities following her suggestions, a kind of emotional connection had formed. In that same occasion, he was also introduced to Yamauchi Heizaburō, a *gama* expert, member of the Speleological Society of Japan, and also one of the individuals who collaborated in this film. In this sequence, he also narrates the only time he had been able to return the remains of a victim to their family, through the cooperation with several organisations that managed to track them down. Matsunaga seems to have found his peace guide vocation within Yamauchi and Gushi's words, who thought that these guides had the duty of restoring dignity to the victims and their families through the remains.

In the depiction of Matsunaga's activities of recovery of remains and oral transmission of experiences and memories, we can read the concrete, physical and continuous practice as a *kōdōteki irei* 行動の慰霊 (active memorial service), as Okada Yumiko (2025, 122) designates Gushiken's bone recovery efforts. Correspondingly, this is at the base of how the postwar generations can achieve a sense of personal connection with the historical matter for Yakabi: by proactively attempting to piece together fragments of memories and trying to objectively understand the events that marked it (2009, xi).

In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols (1991, 252) affirms that "oral histories tend to function in historical documentaries as pieces of argumentation rather than as primary source material still in need of conceptual organization". Yet, in *Gama* oral histories are the primary subject insofar as they show the connection they have with the present and younger generations, specifically because the narrator himself shows a certain degree of emotional closeness with them. Oda Kaori herself reveals her vision of Matsunaga as a man who, despite not having any direct or personal tie to the Battle of Okinawa, "like a *kami*-possessed object, [he] bequeaths people's stories and memories" (Idonuma, Oda 2025).

At this point, it is possible to draw a comparison between Matsunaga's work and her own, because Oda lies, in parallel, in the same position as the guide. Oda sees Matsunaga as a product of constant collaborative work, of the countless interactions with survivors, victims' families and others engaged in activities of recovery, such as Gushi Yae and Yamauchi Heizaburō, in the same way she is, as a filmmaker for whom collective action is invaluable. Hence, *Gama* appears as a reinterpretation of Matsunaga's knowledge, one that comes from memories and practical activity, in a way that

highlights the hypermediacy of the remediation process.⁷ According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999, 47),

the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged way.

Indeed, Oda structures the entire film around his historical accounts, depending considerably on them in order to convey her message. By doing this, she also accords him the responsibility that comes from the weight of the spoken word, as a symbol of the circulation and exchange of experiences between individuals in the present, but also of transmission in the future.

Therefore, we can establish that while Matsunaga is the speaking body, the spectators are the listening body. According to Shinjō Ikuo (2012, 575), the act of listening

requires the abandonment of one's own narrative identity or consistency as a narrator [...] [it] is an act of being consumed by the memories of others [...], it is a constant recomposition of my sense of personal connectedness perceived as known.

That is to say, for a long time Matsunaga has been the listener of these stories and experiences, and the very act of listening has shaped his consciousness of Okinawan history, and this is what allows him to be in a position of power (as the speaker), not only in the film but also in his regular activity as a guide.

So, it is possible to assume that either before or during the filming, Oda was the listener. Only then, with that active listening process, she was able to echo Matsunaga's work through remediation of these stories. While Matsunaga is the one that decides what to say, Oda is the one that designates how to say it. In this sense, Oda's sober and collected style may be due to her respect for the history she is tackling. Oda discusses her respect for the spaces and the stories that inhabit them, saying

I always wondered if I could create something without consuming

⁷ According to the authors, hypermediacy offers "a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as 'windowed' itself - with windows that open on to other representations or other media" (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 33-4). The space of the *gama* is where the film, through the reproduction of the spoken word, opens windows to personal imagination and interpretation, so as to "reproduce the rich sensorium of the human experience" (34).

or exploiting the history of Okinawa. [...] I thought that as long as it was 'Okinawa through Matsunaga', 'Okinawa presented by Matsunaga', maybe there was something I could do. (Idonuma, Oda 2025)

The profound respect that Oda feels for the Okinawan reality and identity, tied both to its history and to its present, appears clear from the repeated mention in other interviews as well, such as the one with Tsukinaga Rie (2024), where she once again states that she has no intention of consuming this place, seeing it merely as a product for a film. This concern is what Vivian Sobchack names 'humane gaze', which is the angle that characterises *Gama*, stating that it appears particularly interesting because the identification of its humanity is determined by the nature of the death before it, by the magnitude or quality of the event that it is observing (Sobchack 1984, 297).

Going deeper into the theme of representation, according to the historian Robert Rosenstone (1988, 1180), the documentary, compared to written history, is hardly a reflection of an objective reality, but a work that comes to exist inspired by a specific narrative, which is what gives meaning to the final material. However, he recognises that it is actually easy to ignore how much written history, specifically narrative history, have also been influenced by genre and language conventions (Rosenstone 1988, 1184-5). In order to evaluate any type of representation, whether it is a written text or a film, Roxana Waterson finds it necessary to imagine that there are subtle lines separating accuracy and verisimilitude, picking up the potential emotional truths carried by the mode of exposition. She further explains that

none of this, in my view, cancels out the potential importance of film, both in multiplying the available points of view on the historical record, and in working against either the kind of heedless forgetting that comes about through indifference, or the active political suppression of memories considered to be uncomfortable by those in positions of power. (Waterson 2007, 56)

The variety of experiences and places that Matsunaga presents in his narration, such as the Shimukugama episode and the story of

Asato Toshie,⁸ are always handled with intense compassion, not only expressed by Matsunaga's comments, but also by Oda's aesthetic techniques shaping these stories to show respect and restore dignity. As previously stated, Oda's style is formally sober and demure, close to the observational style exhibited in *Aragane*, sometimes vanishing behind the main subject: the words of those who have much to tell and that she feels like picking up (Idonuma, Oda 2025), leaving space to Matsunaga's storytelling. In this way, he addresses the audience and directly calls for the spectator's personal involvement, inviting them to be fully present, as if they were in the *gama* with him. A moment in the film where we see this is when Matsunaga warns that he will now be showing a *kurayami taiken* 暗闇体験 (experience of total darkness), in which both back lights and front lights are turned off, and the screen turns pitch black. By negating the spectator's ability to see, the focus is now on the acoustic dimension, making sounds the protagonists of the scene before Matsunaga starts speaking again. Among ambient sounds being heard, are birds' chirps and the water flow, also while the guide narrates what *kurayami taiken* consisted of. Matsunaga explains that these experiences of complete darkness were the living conditions of those who, making an effort to resist the American threat, sought refuge in the *gama* until they heard signs of foreign soldiers moving away, and tried to find a way out through any light source. This segment is particularly poignant as we can read it also as a way to immerse the spectator in a part of the traumatic reality the victims experienced, allowing them to have a deeper contact with what would be only a horrifying tale. Susannah Radstone (2010, 334) believes that

trauma films have the potential to provide a cultural 'working through' of traumatic memories – that they might enable some remembrance of events that, due to their shocking nature, have left only scars rather than memories.

8 The Shimukugama episode is known for its positive outcome: thanks to the mediation of two Okinawans who had lived in Hawaii during part of the Meiji and the Taishō era, all of the people who were seeking shelter there survived. Next, Matsunaga introduces Asato Toshie as one of the survivors of Todorokigama, who entered the *gama* with her children. Facing hunger and threat of being killed, she went to look for food, but many times went back to her family empty-handed. Not all of her children were able to survive the hunger, and some eventually died, with the youngest being nine months old. When Asato and the other Todorokigama refugees were caught by Americans, they were sent to a concentration camp in Tomishiro. Matsunaga reports that she first talked about this experience in 1977 in occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, and he met her when she joined the 'Article 9 Society', accompanying her in multiple activities and remembrance events.

Radstone then criticises the assumption that the emotional connection that comes to exist between spectator and subject during the film is strong enough to erase social and historical differences, which is at the base of the concept of 'prosthetic memory' theorised by Alison Landsberg. Radstone (2010, 334-5) argues that this idea fails to consider the complexity of the connection between spectator and cinematic text, and also that it confers an immense power to cinema, that is to say the power to transform identity through the memories that define it. As Landsberg (2003, 149-51) defines them, 'prosthetic' memories become personal as they are internalised through experience with mass media's various technologies to represent memory, and they are called 'prosthetic' because they are indeed not authentic. She appears to give this kind of memories enough power to overcome any type of distinction, opening up the possibility "for collective horizons of experience and [...] unexpected political alliances" (Landsberg 2003, 149).

However, this cannot be conceived as a universal theory that allows for the interpretation of cinematic texts. It is possible to admit though, that it better fits *Cenote*, as it is a work characterised by a striking imaginative effort, mainly achieved through the 8mm camera usage, which invokes a sense of nostalgia and familiarity that potentially any member of the audience could tap into. In *Gama* instead, there is no sense of familiarity being invoked. Rather, the intention lies in the gathering of several stories, experiences and episodes that concur to the creation of a real cultural memory, bringing them to light and studying them through the tools of the current era. Although this could be said about *Cenote* too, the distinctive features in *Cenote* were the succession of underwater sequences and surface sequences – particularly invoking the familiarity of the images of what Manuel Cuellar (2022, xi) defines as *lo Mexicano*, popular images that constitute the common ideal of Mexican culture –, the overlaying of various voices, various texts, various images and various sound tracks, as the expression of a lively culture that developed around a sense of spiritual respect for the underwater.

In *Gama* there is no such alternation or multiplicity of medial sources, the only environment the spectator can focus on is the inside of the cave, and only in rare instances, which will be later mentioned, the outside. Also, there is no sense of nostalgia that Oda wants to invoke within the general audience, focusing almost exclusively on the *gama*. Therefore in my opinion, this concept of prosthetic memory cannot work fully in *Gama*, not only because the spectator's engagement can only be limited to a sense of basic empathy, but also because, as I will demonstrate later, total identification with trauma victims and full comprehension of their pain is impossible. As for empathy, it is conveyed by Oda's gaze, avoiding close-up shots and point-of-view shots, highlighting silences or ambient noises,

lingering on rocks and bone fragments, on the glimpses of nature surrounding the cave entrances, giving prominence to lights and shadows inside the caves. Indeed, reducing the visual weight of the human figures in the shot creates a sense of distance between the spectator and the subject, but only because this gaze intentionally avoids hinting at how the spectator should feel. By representing the unrepresentable, bodies in material absence, it actively engages the spectator to reflect as it is “inscribing the intimacy and respect and sympathy it feels with those who die in its vision” (Sobchack 1984, 297). Paula Rabinowitz, discussing the power of documentary film and its relation with history, argues that “the historical documentary not only tells us about the past, but asks us to do something about it as well – to act as the Angel of History and redeem the present through the past” (Rabinowitz 1993, 132).

Gama is a work which, like every other feature film directed by Oda, aims to lead the spectator deep into hidden or distant spaces, as well as to analyse in a more or less direct way the history preserved inside them, and in this case its most prominent feature is the ability to establish a bond with the spectator's historical consciousness. Oral narration taking place inside the cave is the most efficient way to guarantee audience participation and imagination not only while watching the film, but also after, in the creation and circulation of discourses around the theme, aiming for the emergence of new and aware subjectivities. *Gama* are fully considered *lieux de mémoire* by Pierre Nora's own definition, places “of refuge, sanctuaries of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage, where one finds the living heart of memory” (Nora 1989, 23).

They are places which are subject at the same time of sensorial experience and abstract elaboration, and are *lieux de mémoire* “in three senses of the word, material, symbolic and functional” (18-19), generated in the constant interaction between history and memory, triggered by the very act of remembering.

4 The Spectre of History in the Underground

Within the framework of Oda's usual interest for history hidden in the underground, this work appears as aiming to develop a certain sensitivity around current sociopolitical issues not just regarding Okinawa, but regarding the relationship between the State and this polychrome reality, through images that gain relevance in their own visual absence.

Similarly to how Yamashiro Chikako, born and raised in Okinawa prefecture, expresses her closeness in works like *Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat*, Oda Kaori, born and raised in Ōsaka, touches Okinawa's open wounds through survivors' experiences, passed on

from one generation to the other. In the interview with Eguchi Yūmi, it emerges that Oda Kaori's primary interest was to descend into the depths of the islands, and meeting Matsunaga catalysed her intention to show human memory inside the cave. Oda admits that for her the film is *ningen no kioku* 人間の記憶 (human memory), and that memory is made up of other people's traces that we hold inside, as proof that someone has lived somewhere until that moment, and will keep on living even in the future. Oda believes that if we go back in time, we will reach a point beyond which we cannot go, and in this base there will be someone's voice (Katada, Miura, Huang 2024, 21). This is why, in *Gama* and *Cenote*, the main works focused on the theme of memory, sound is so distinctly relevant and the voice has such a leading and symbolic role. The voice is the medium through which narration is always handed down, but in *Gama* this happens in front of a camera, and narration is the core of a cinematic product that guarantees a potentially wider diffusion in time and space. The relevance of this act, of preserving memories and stories of this past, is also emphasised by Matsunaga: after telling the Shimukugama episode, he lets out a personal comment about the meaning of life and peace.

So, in the crevice between Matsunaga's factuality while recounting these stories and his own subjective considerations, I maintain that it is plausible to read a political stance, one that claims Okinawans' place in recent history: a place hanging between two governments, two systems of thought, where different realities and identities coexist, and that because of this complexity have never been adequately handled. For this reason, according to Hook and Siddle (2003, 11), in Okinawa historical storytelling has always been inextricably tied with a political activity because of Okinawa's context of subordination.

In fact, in cases like Yamashiro Chikako's *Your Voice*, it is nearly impossible to overlook the political aspect if we remember that in the same year, 2007, the Ministry of Education announced an order to delete from history textbooks any reference to coercion of Okinawans to commit mass suicide by the Japanese military during the Battle of Okinawa (Aniya 2008, 2). It is in contexts like these that oral testimonies, and therefore the voice, acquire relevance not only on a personal level, but on a collective and political one.

Oda's choice to convey these values through acoustic dimension is particularly meaningful in the context of 'postmemory', conceptualised by Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Generation of Postmemory*. For Hirsch, being a descendant of a family that lived through the Holocaust, 'postmemory'

describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who

came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (Hirsch 2012, 5)

It is interesting to notice how also in the case of peace guides like Matsunaga, they are usually individuals who have no direct remembrance of the war, and one-third of guides also comes from other prefectures (Kitamura 2006, 60). So it is natural to wonder what pushes people who are not directly involved in this portion of history to actively enter those stories, telling them and propagating them. For Oda,

there is something we all share, and I think that [in this] there are lost memories, memories we cannot recognise. It has been called in many ways, collective memory, or collective subconscious. But I want to seek out what this is for me, what this shared something is. (Katada, Miura, Huang 2024, 21)

Oda then starts her quest towards this universal subconscious through two main devices: Matsunaga’s narration and the emphasis on the physicality of history, which she represents on the one hand in a concrete way, with several shots focusing on the remains, fragments and pebbles found in the underground, and on the other hand in a metaphorical way, with the figure of the woman in blue, played by actress, dancer and director Yoshigai Nao. Oda refers to her as a ‘shadow’, an embodiment of collective memory (Eguchi, Oda 2025). This ‘shadow’ is filmed roaming in the *gama*, touching the rough edges of the cave surfaces, often appearing in the same shot as Matsunaga while he is talking, but always at a certain distance: either in the background or next to the margins, sometimes anticipating or following Matsunaga’s movements, even echoing them, as shown in Figure 3, where she stands in the same position as the guide in Figure 2. In other cases, the camera only focuses on her walking between the rocks or entering narrow tunnels, while Matsunaga’s narration is left going.



Figure 3 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

However, it is possible to point out that the physicality of history is not only conveyed by the 'shadow': the scenery, too, has a strongly symbolic and evocative power. The scenery has a leading role precisely because it is a *lieu de mémoire*. *Gama*, as spectral caves where horrors and tragedies occurred and whose memories are inextricably linked with wartime dread, seem to absorb the characters, their actions and their words. By never using medium shots, close-up shots, and rarely using detail shots, she gives limited room to human presence. She focuses on the natural element, as those surfaces are the ones imbued in historical significance. The natural landscape looms over the characters not just in the scenes where they are walking on the rock-strewn trails in the underground, but also in shots like in Figure 4, where Matsunaga and the young woman are shown to be talking, although the dialogue is inaudible. Here we see the two standing behind a seemingly flimsy fence, a rope delimiting the access tracks, under a dark stony roof-like formation, where the camera embraces the intricacy of the tree branches and of the banisters, and the light that filters from the green leaves.



Figure 4 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

This inclination to tell stories, lives and experiences and reviving them through landscape is what brings Oda close to Takamine Gō. Regarding *Okinawan Dream Show*, Takamine had likened the camera to a vacuum cleaner that had to absorb the smell concealed under those landscapes, so as to finally give dignity to those who died in those streets and fields. In a certain sense, it can be associated to Martin Pollack's concept of 'contaminated landscapes', that is to say "landscapes that were places of mass killings committed covertly and out of plain sight, often under strict secrecy" (cited in Frach 2022, 101). In a study of Polish director Paweł Pawlikowski's 2013 film *Ida*, a film facing the hardships tied to the memory of the Second World War in Poland, which emerge through wide shots where sceneries and landscapes become particularly poignant, Sylwia Frach (2022, 101) argues that "the term 'contaminated' implies that the landscape is dirty, poisoned, infested and/or tainted by the crimes committed there".

This is what both Takamine Gō and Oda Kaori see in Okinawa. Although not all *gama* are locations where tragedies like the Chibichirigama mass suicide took place, these caves are still the shell for traumatic experiences whose transmission, as freeing as it can be, ends up renewing the pain. After all, Pierre Nora (1989, 22) claims that memory "attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events".

In addition, Hirsch's vision of the value of landscape appears relevant as well. She holds that memory is mediated, cultural, but also silently permeates the present landscapes, thus reconfiguring private and public spaces of the postgeneration (Hirsch 2012, 25).

In *Gama* Oda's effort is focused on the exploration of subterranean passages where the memories of survivors have sedimented, and where those of the next generations have settled as well, because these generations share that pain according to the structure of postmemory, a "transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove" (Hirsch 2012, 6).

To balance out the sense of loss and emptiness and to the apparent intangibility of memory that Oda focuses on at first, there is the actual effort to give a material dimension to history, not just through the physicality of the 'shadow', but also through an emphasis, in the second half of the film, on the archaeological work Matsunaga oversees. There is a detail shot where a pair of gloved hands are separating stones from bone, ceramic fragments and bullets, and a full shot where the 'shadow' is watching Matsunaga and an archaeologist searching for human remains [fig. 5], and one with a strong evocative power, where the Shadow caresses these bones and takes one between her fingers. The emphasis on the material remains can be explained with Takenaka Akiko's analysis about the current idea of wartime in Japan, as she believes that while it is possible to come to terms with loss, it is never possible to overcome an absence, "thus, I suggest, the drive to fill the gap with ever-growing collections of war stuff, a surfeit of which piles up in the storerooms of museums across Japan" (Takenaka 2015, 153). However, she recognises that in many occasions, early museums or display rooms were more focused on collecting and displaying archaeological finds rather than offering an exhaustive portrait of the Japanese war experience (145). But recovering material finds as an act is fundamental for memory, as confirmed by Matsunaga's words in one of the following sequences.

Indeed, when Matsunaga introduces himself to the archaeologists, recounting the beginning of his work as a guide, he mentions the experience of recovering human remains as impactful and formative. It was the *kikkake* きっかけ (trigger) for him, emphasising that to him remains speak more than words, and that since those remains belong to people who died during the war, their duty as guides was to remember them. Then, working in the *gama* is an activity where, as Jay Winter (2010, 322) argues in his study about sites of memory, "people affirm their faith that history has a meaning".



Figure 5 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

In *Gama* the visible and the invisible, the material and the abstract blend within each other, the stories that resist through several generations thanks to the oral transmission have the same value of tangible remains, that need a support that enables the full expression of its meaning, particularly in the construction of a complete historical memory. The material element, both for Matsunaga and for Oda, is the driving force of an interest that leads to a metaphorical as well as physical descent into the depths of the invisible, and it acquires meaning thanks to the intrinsic value of the traumatic experience.

Discussing trauma literature, Kalí Tal writes that “trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside of the bounds of ‘normal’ human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded” (Tal 1996, 15). It is possible to draw a comparison between this concept of ‘liminal state’ and the cave as they are represented in Oda’s work, ‘hidden’ places where it is impossible to differentiate present and past. Oda Kaori, leading the spectator in such a spectral place, opens a communication channel between the living and the dead, no matter their generation or native community, as they all belong to the human race. For Oda, there is something lying in the bottom of each one of us, and that we all share as we are part of mankind. The way Oda chooses to put this welding power on screen, visualising it in *Gama* for the first time, is by expanding, through the introduction of the ‘Shadow’ character (Erikawa, Oda 2023), the question of consciousness and collective memory that she commenced with *Cenote*. The ‘shadow’ performs a katabasis in order to feel the sense of death and loss, attending Matsunaga’s accounts and infiltrating in the narrow passages of the caves. Ambient sounds reinforce the sense of dismay

she feels wandering in a dark, unknown dimension, even when she follows Matsunaga's movements. And lastly, in the scene where the Shadow delicately touches a bone and holds it between her fingers while Matsunaga is talking about his remains recovery experience, it is possible to read the reality of where peace guides operate, that Kitamura (2006, 63) describes as

not 'narrators' based on their own war experience [...] not historians who aim to tell objectively and empirically the history of the Battle of Okinawa, and they do not locate their activity as a mechanical, routine work, simply 'inheriting' copies of original testimonies. *Heiwa gaido* is a role that tries to face the uniqueness of the events that occurred in the *gama*.

Therefore, it is a person that returns dignity and identity to the victim, approaching the historical experience from a realistic, but not unemotional, perspective.

As a matter of fact, this is the same approach Oda had throughout the entire film, standing right between a historical account of the Battle of Okinawa and the personal experience of survivors or the victims' families. Through the 'shadow', Oda wants to express her idea of memory, continuing the work she started with *Cenote*. For the director, historical memory presupposes a collective dimension, and by virtue of that, it never fades out and constantly flows from one generation to the other, ensuring the preservation of an immaterial heritage that comprises images, memories, voices and sounds that anybody can access, even if they do not share the same culture or history. Rather, that part of humanity is called to help protecting, recognising, discussing and legitimising that heritage, as it is an integral part of a historically subaltern identity. Marianne Hirsch elaborates a similar reflection, explaining that

As a form of counter-history, 'memory' offered a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion, and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress. It promised to propose forms of justice outside of the hegemonic structures of the strictly juridical, and to engage in advocacy and activism on behalf of individuals and groups whose lives and whose stories have not yet been thought. (Hirsch 2012, 15-16)

In a certain sense, Oda shows that there is an unbridgeable fracture between the direct memory of survivors and the one belonging to people who can indirectly access that memory, exclusively through testimonies and recovered objects. Similarly to what can be read in Yamashiro Chikako's *Your Voice*, in *Gama* we can find that it is impossible for an individual who is far in space and time to understand

the pain someone else has been through. Yamashiro expresses this impossibility in only seven minutes, through the lip synchronisation detaching more and more, and Joshua Chambers-Letson defines this as the 'incommensurable'. For him, "the staging of the work has as much to do with the transmission of memory across time as it evidences the incommensurable break that exists between the previous generation and the present one" (Chambers-Letson 2014). *Your Voice* precisely reveals the impossibility to fill in this rift, despite the intention to use one's own body as a vessel to channel transgenerational memory. Yamashiro Chikako shows that full comprehension can only occur until a certain point, with no possibility to fully achieve it. Like Yamashiro, Oda Kaori faces this rift, but with a different approach. For Oda, mankind shares a core that activates understanding and empathy, and in social relations it gains consciousness of the 'incommensurable', of incommunicability of certain stories and experiences, and in the present we are just left with words and remains of the past. Although these are live matter and circulate between members of the same generation or belonging to different generations, cannot fill that gap. She starts the exploration of the soul of history from the underground, the metaphorical bottom of a soul that is common to the entire humanity. This is not just an effort to fill that gap, but to retrace the position of those stories and lives in that depth, so as not to let them go overlooked or forgotten. So, once we acknowledge the impossibility of perfectly capturing that suffering, it is possible to redirect our efforts to what Walter Benjamin (1968, 264) defines as a "weak Messianic power" so that the hopes of past generations can be the ground for a better future. On this line Oda closes *Gama*: Matsunaga is a clear expression of the peace guides, volunteers and archaeologists' work, while the Shadow walks towards the surface, shown as a blinding light. The succession of static shots in the final sequence depicts a nearly desolated Okinawa, where the only human presence is the Shadow. In the images of the woods, the houses, the sea, and the beach where the Shadow is shown sitting at the very end, under a thunderous airplane noise, there is the light. It is History walking in the present, on the streets of Okinawa, eighty years after the end of the war, and the islands show wounds that determine their complex and fragmented identity.

5 Conclusion

In the context of Oda Kaori's filmography, *Gama* is the most strikingly expository and educational documentary, despite keeping a few phantasmal elements that signal the intention to go beyond the mere informative purpose.

In fact, in *Gama* the spectator faces the reality of the Battle of Okinawa of 1944, that has been fairly overlooked both by the Japanese and the Americans, especially of the postwar generations. Even though Oda returns to her native Japan after two feature films shot in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Mexico, this is not a familiar theme or reality for her, leading her to approach the Okinawan history and identity in the same way she approached the miner community in Bosnia and the Mayans in Yucatán, like a foreigner. Despite sharing the 'apolide' approach with the two preceding works, *Gama* differentiates itself as it has a single distinct leading character recounting the episodes that happened during the battle, 'peace guide' Matsunaga Mitsuo. He leads Oda into the caves, where he tells stories about bombing survivors, mass suicides, and escapes, sometimes revealing people's identities, as they lived long enough to tell their own experiences. The choice of leading the spectator into the cave is not just due to the fact that peace guides usually show the visitors around, but also to establish these caves as *lieux de mémoire*.

Gama can also be considered a relevant work in the context of the representations of Okinawa. It does not just raise questions about the connection between history, documentary and narration, but it also problematises that history in the current visions of Okinawa. In the first place, as it is based on a series of historical and traumatic events, it raises the issue about the representation of death and trauma in documentary, resorting to original and indirect renditions of those events. Regarding the issues of objectivity in documentary, many agree that history is always narration, whether it is oral, written or visual, and that for this very reason, it is always influenced by a vision that characterises its angle, to a certain degree. Secondly, and linked with the first point, *Gama* is a documentary which relies heavily on the use of narration, therefore creating a symbolic link with the oral tradition of handing down knowledge, experiences and stories that shape the identity of a community, this time with the means of cinema. Thirdly, in *Gama* the focus is collective history, the cultural memory that has affected the entire Okinawan people even in the following decades, and that has profoundly marked its identity. Also, Matsunaga does not hide his own view of certain issues, such as the idea of peace and the value of life, despite always keeping a plain and laconic style of storytelling. It is this radical value of such historical events that strengthen the sense of community, also on

a transgenerational perspective, aiming to raise discussions about Okinawan identity both within the Okinawan community and outside.

Whereas fictional and cultural products set in Okinawa do not generally produce critical observations about the specificity of the Okinawan reality, as a mere depiction of the islands closer to an exotic paradise in the Pacific Ocean, native artists and directors, such as Takamine Gō, Yamashiro Chikako and Okuma Katsuya immediately stand out in the context of films and videos that address the transmission of war memories. The plurality that characterises Okinawa has a prominent role both in the characters' identities and in the variety of media that Takamine Gō presents in his films, giving space to indigenous people whose artistic visions could contribute to a collage that emphasises the ethnic, historical and cultural complexity of the archipelago.

While Takamine's cinema faces the island's past only to the extent of 'capturing the smell of death' in the streets, Oda's activity can be likened to that of his 'vacuum-cleaner camera' during the shooting of *Okinawan Dream Show*: capturing the invisible in the underground and restoring dignity to those souls. Also, with *Gama*, Oda evokes the poetic vision of historical trauma of Yamashiro Chikako, highlighting at the same time the effort to empathise with the survivors and victims, but also the impossibility to reach full identification. *Gama* also mirrors some elements of Okuma Katsuya's 2024 documentary *Close to the Bone*: not only the presence of a guide-like figure who is engaged in bone recovery activities, but mostly reflections on the relevance of physical practice, sharing and circulation of experiences in order to gain a sense of personal involvement and connection with history, within the present communities and with the dead as well.

Oda keeps a minimalistic style, with mostly fixed wide shots and minimal camera work, but never cold. On the contrary, Oda participates emotionally in the tragedy, enters the *gama* in a respectful way. She also has a phantasmal yet corporeal figure enter the *gama*, a figure that symbolises memory, and where it is possible to find her idea of a collective consciousness that belongs to the entire humankind. The woman that descends into the cave, follows Matsunaga's paths, and touches remains that were found in caves, stones and bones, highlights the materiality of history and the contact between past and present.

Her final anabasis is symbolic: the Shadow walks towards the surface, visually marked by a powerful blinding light. She walks through the streets, the trees, the houses, and eventually she is shown sitting on the shore. She brings a message of hope for the future, a message that Oda shares with Yamashiro. Oda recognises and accepts the immense distance between individuals, which makes complete identification with trauma victims impossible. However, that does not mean that listening to this pain and acknowledging it

is useless. Rather, it creates understanding and cohesion within a community, it promotes bonding with strangers and victims of the past, and this empathy is what foregrounds future efforts to protect ourselves and other communities from potential analogous threats.

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