

# AOYAMA SHINJI

## Profile

Aoyama Shinji was born in Kitakyushu, Fukuoka Prefecture, on July 13, 1964, to school teacher parents. While maintaining a strong interest in music, Aoyama first began to want to make films after seeing Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*. He started attending Rikkyo University in Tokyo in 1984, majoring in American literature. It was there that he attended classes on cinema taught by Hasumi Shigehiko, Japan's most important film critic in the 1980s and later president of Tokyo University. Hasumi's influence was significant, not only on Aoyama, but on a number of other Rikkyo students, including directors such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi (*Cure, Bright Future*), Shiota Akihiko (*Moonlight Whispers*), and Suo Masayuki (*Shall We Dance?*), who graduated before Aoyama arrived, and classmates like Shinozaki Makoto (*Okaeri*). All these artists began making 8mm film while in college as well as writing film criticism and theory. After graduating from Rikkyo in 1989, Aoyama began working as an assistant director on a number of films and television programs, including *The Guard from Underground* (Kurosawa Kiyoshi, 1991), *The Written Face* (Daniel Schmidt, 1994), *Cold Fever* (dir. Fredrik Thor Fridriksson, 1995), *BeRLin* (dir. Riju Go, 1995), and other Kurosawa films.

He debuted as a director in 1995 with *It's Not in the Textbook!*, a made-for-video film, and completed his first theatrical film, the critically acclaimed *Helpless*, in 1996. Like Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Aoyama's work has often bridged the gap between genre cinema and art film, as he has worked in genres such as the yakuza film, the youth film, and horror, while bending the conventions with his concerns for a political cinema. Many of his films are about family or romantic relationships, trying to explore the possibilities of knowing an "other," while respecting their individuality (their "unknowability") against a culture that can often oppressively inflict technologies of knowledge on its members. Films like *Eureka*, which won the FIPRESCI Prize and the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival, took up these relationships as a means of politically confronting postwar Japanese history, particularly its traumas and its evasions of responsibility. His film criticism and theoretical writings, both in publications and on the internet, have been a strong, polemical force in Japanese culture, and major intellectual journals such as *Yuriika* have devoted special issues to his work.

He has also written several novels, his own novelization of *Eureka* winning the prestigious Mishima Yukio Prize. His interest in literature has also led to films dealing with such novelists as Nakagami Kenji (*To the Alley*) and Tokuda Shusei (*Days In the Shade*). Aoyama has written the screenplays for most of his films, as well as sometimes the music, and his interest in music has been reflected in documentaries on musicians such as Chris Cutler (*June 12 1998*) and Uehara Tomoko (*Song of Ajima*). Apart from his novels, he has published a book of his own film theory and criticism and collections of conversations with other directors and writers, as well as edited a book on Wim Wenders. He teaches filmmaking at the Film School of Tokyo and recently taught a seminar at Tokyo University. His wife is the actress Toyota Maho, who starred in his film *Desert Moon*.

## Books by Aoyama Shinji

- Aoyama Shinji. *Helpless*. Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2003.  
Aoyama Shinji. *Tsuki no sabaku=Desert Moon*. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2002.  
Aoyama Shinji. *Ware eiga o hakken seri*. Tokyo: Seidosha, 2001.  
Aoyama Shinji. *Yuriika=Eureka*. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2002.  
Aoyama Shinji, ed. *Bim Bendazu*. Tokyo: Kinema Junposha, 2000.  
Aoyama Shinji, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, et al. *Rosuto in Amerika*. Tokyo: Dejitaru Hariuddo Shuppanyoku, 2000.  
Aoyama Shinji, Abe Kazushige, Nakahara Masaya. *Aoyama Shinji to Abe Kazushige to Nakahara Masaya no shinekon*. Tokyo: Ritoru Moe, 2004.

## **Filmography for Aoyama Shinji**

- 1995 *It's Not in the Textbook!* (Kyokasho ni nai! / KSS, for video / also screenplay)  
1996 *Helpless* (WOWOW/Bandai Visual / also screenplay, music)  
*1/5* (8 min. short for the "Celebrate Cinema 101" compilation)  
*A Weapon in My Heart* (Waga mune ni kyoki ni ari / KSS, for video / also screenplay, music)  
*Chinpira/Two Punks* (Chinpira / Taki Corporation/Tsuburaya Eizo)  
1997 *WiLd LiFe* (Video Champ/Taki Corporation / also screenplay\*, music)  
*An Obsession* (Tsumetai chi / Taki Corporation/Tohoku Shinsha / also co-producer\*,  
screenplay, music, editing\*)  
1999 *Shady Grove* (Bitters End / also screenplay\*, music)  
*EM/Embalming* (GAGA Communications / also screenplay\*\*, music, editing\*\*\*)  
*June 12 1998* (boid / video documentary)  
2000 *Eureka* (Suncent Cinema Works / also screenplay, music, editing)  
2001 *To the Alley* (Roji e: Nakagami Kenji no nokoshita firumu / Slow Learner / documentary)  
*So as Not to Say Everything about Her Already Aged Self* (Sude ni oita kanojo no subete ni  
tsuite wa kataranu tame ni / 51 min. video for the Takasaki Film Festival)  
2002 *Detective Festival: The Detective Who Can Say No* (Keiji matsuri: No to ieru keiji / short)  
*Desert Moon* (Tsuki no sabaku / Rentrak Japan/ also screenplay, editing)  
*Song of Ajima* (Ajimaa no uta: Uehara Tomoko, tenjo no utagoe / Rentrak  
Japan/Ajima/Rumble Fish / documentary)  
*A Forest with No Name* (Shiritsu tanei Hama Maiku: Namae no nai mori / director's cut of  
TV show for Yomiuri Television / also screenplay)  
2003 *Like a Desperado Under the Eaves* (Nokishita no narazumono mitai ni / 41 min. DV short for  
the Jeonju Film Festival / also screenplay)  
*Days In the Shade* (Shusei tabi nikki / 43 min. short produced by Eurospace/Tatemachi  
Shotengai Shinko Kumiai/Cine-monde / also screenplay)  
2004 *Lakeside Murder Case* (Reikusaido mada kesu / Fuji Television / also screenplay\*\*\*\*)

Note: all music credits with Yamada Isao

\* with Sato Kumi

\*\* with Hashimoto Izo

\*\*\* with Ueno Soichi

\*\*\*\* with Fukazawa Masaki

## **Further Reading on Aoyama Shinji**

"Aoyama Shinji: Shinkasuru eiga." *Yurika* vol. 33 no. 2 (2001).

Gerow, Aaron. "Aoyama Shinji." *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. 16-25.

Higuchi Yasuhito, ed. *Eureka Special*. Tokyo: boid, 2001.

Matthews, Peter. "Aftermath." *Sight & Sound* vol. 11 no. 11 (2001).

Pipolo, Tony. "Vanishing Point." *Film Comment* vol. 37 no. 3 (2001).

"Tokushu: Aoyama Shinji *Eureka*." *Cahiers du cinema Japon* no. 31 (2001).

Prepared by Aaron Gerow