

A Man Vanishes

(Ningen jôhatsu)

Staff

Production Imamura Production, Nihon Eiga Shinsha, Art Theatre Guild of Japan
Producer Imamura Shôhei
Director Imamura Shôhei
Screenplay Imamura Shôhei, Urayama Kirirô
Photography Ishiguro Kenji
Editing Tanji Mutsuo
Sound Benitani Kenichi, Takeshige Kunio
Lighting Matsushita Fumio
Music Mayuzumi Toshirô
Art direction Takada Ichirô

Cast

Hayakawa Yoshie, Tsuyuguchi Shigeru, Hayakawa Sayo, Imamura Shôhei

Release date: June 25, 1967

130 min.; B&W; 1:1.33; 35mm

Released in June 1967, *A Man Vanishes* was the first film co-produced by the Art Theater Guild (ATG). Since its inception in 1962, ATG has devoted itself to distributing both foreign art-house cinema as well as domestic independent films. Yet given the profitable success of such low budget films as Mishima Yukio's *Patriotism* (*Yûkoku*, 1965), it also began to explore the possibility of producing films. Upon hearing about this, the director Imamura Shôhei approached ATG asking for financial support for his first documentary. Imamura was one of the most provocative filmmakers of the time and, as with other Japanese New Wave directors, he had just launched his own production company, Imamura Productions. At their first meeting, Imamura and Iseki Taneo, the president of ATG, agreed on the following terms: 1) the budget would be ten million yen; 2) the cost would be split between ATG and the filmmaker; and 3) if the film went over budget, all excesses would be paid by the filmmaker. In the end, Imamura spent more than seventeen million yen for his film. The film's distribution rights, moreover, went to Nikkatsu to pay for the debt Imamura incurred from his extra expenses. Though far from an auspicious beginning, *A Man Vanishes* became the template for the ATG's characteristic co-productions, which aptly came to be known as "ten million yen movies" (*issen-man-en eiga*).

A Man Vanishes was initially conceived as a documentary about a young salesman named Ôshima Tadashi, who abruptly disappears from society without a single word, leaving behind his fiancée Yoshie. Following Yoshie's relentless search for her unfaithful lover, the film was supposed to have a standard plot resolution, with Yoshie either meeting Ôshima again or at least discovering something about his plight. But as the actual shooting proceeded, Imamura couldn't help but come to the conclusion that it would be impossible for Yoshie to know Ôshima's whereabouts, even despite her exhaustive search through mass media channels like TV and weekly magazines. Ordered to bring an end to a project that had no plausible ending, Imamura was forced to redesign the entire structure of the

film, which was already several months into the shooting. The substantial changes that Imamura made at this stage, however, would ultimately secure the work's unique position in the history of documentary film. Instead of tracking down the reasons for Ôshima's enigmatic disappearance, Imamura decided to defy conventional documentary filmmaking per se, which he saw as failing to grasp human truths.

This important shift from an ordinary documentary to a meta-documentary occurs halfway through the film, and is easily recognizable on both the narrative and visual levels. Indeed, in the first half of the film, Imamura employs several cinéma-vérité devices like the handheld camera, synchronized sound, and the rough footage captured by hidden cameras. He also use professional actor Tsuyuguchi Shigeru as his stand-in so as to conceal the director's involvement and manipulation as much as possible. Yet once his (and Yoshie's) never-ending pursuit of the missing Ôshima proves to be in vain, Imamura begins to subvert the logic of documentary film that had up to that point established the film's credibility. First, by inserting the shots of himself and his crew either shooting or arguing about the scenes in the film, he tells us that what we have seen on the screen was in fact determined by the codes of conventional filmmaking. So long as these codes are obeyed, he suggests, there is no crucial difference between fiction and documentary. In order to break with the conventions that have prevented him from a full investigation of his characters, Imamura deliberately appears in front of the camera and intervenes in the conversation between Yoshie and her elder sister Sayo, asking provocative and unreserved questions about "their" relationships with Ôshima. Finally, he goes so far as to declare, "This is nothing but fiction!" leaving the viewer uncertain as to where the truth lies.

Imamura's negation of documentary is not meant to suggest that everything depicted in the film was fake. Rather, it implies that if there is something we could call the truth, it can only be found in the entangled layers of fictional and non-fictional elements. Imamura must have learned this from observing the transformation occurring in Yoshie, who gradually began to behave like an actress, as she got used to being filmed by the camera. In the beginning of the film, Yoshie still seems hesitant about being involved in the project, and there is a noticeable tension between her and the film crew. Yet the more she is asked to present herself as a miserable but passionate woman searching for her missing lover, the more she begins to hide what she really thinks. Hoping to break through the fictitious role that she has imposed on herself, Imamura follows her every move with a hidden camera and succeeds in filming a scene in which she confesses that she has already lost her attachment to Ôshima and has now fallen in love with her new partner Tsuyuguchi. But even this recorded confession cannot be given full credibility, for Yoshie, according to Imamura, completely forgot about Tsuyuguchi as soon as the shooting process was completed, as though that too was also part of her "acting." Recalling Yoshie's astonishing ability to adopt different roles, Imamura later stated that the film's title, instead of *A Man Vanishes*, should have been "When a Woman Becomes an Actress."

Imamura was not alone in attacking the traditional distinctions between fiction and documentary. On the contrary, this became a common strategy among several cutting-edge filmmakers of the late 1960s. While Jean-Luc Godard had taken the initiative in Europe with his revolutionary work made during the Dziga Vertov Group period (1968-1972), in Japan, directors like Ôshima Nagisa, Yoshida Kijû, Hani Susumu, and Matsumoto Toshio (note that all of them co-produced their films with ATG) experimented radically with their own take on this same issue. *A Man Vanishes*, however, differs from the works of these "modernist" directors in that it clearly captures the director's hesitation and bewilderment toward his style and subject matter. In other words, however harshly it attacks the notion of documentary, the film still remains a credible document of real people. Seen from this perspective, *A Man Vanishes* can be said to have paved the way for the evolution of documentary film in Japan from the 1970s onward, starting with the emergence of even more self-reflexive films such as Hara Kazuo's

Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974 (Kyokushiteki erosu: Renka 1974, 1974) and Tsuchiya Yutaka's The New God (Atarashii kamisama, 1999).

Naoki Yamamoto