

## UNDERGROUND

Director Kaori Oda

Japan | 2024

83 min. | Japanese with English subtitles

**Screenplay** Kaori Oda. **Cinematography** Yoshiko Takano. **Editing** Kaori Oda. **Music** Miyu Hosoi. **Sound Design** Iwao Yamazaki. **Sound** Iwao Yamazaki. **Producers** Ryohei Tsutsui, Eijun Sugihara. **Production company** trixta (Yokohama, Japan). **With** Nao Yoshigai, Mitsuo Matsunaga, Mikie Nishihara, Eiga Matsuo, Hayato Nagasaki.

**World sales** Parallax Films

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### Synopsis

Darkness and light, reflections and projections, gloomy outlines, a shadow taking the shape of a young woman. Kaori Oda's **UNDERGROUND** gently leads us down into the depths of the caves of Okinawa, superimposing past and present, memory and sensual-haptic experience. The film is a creative expansion of **GAMA** (2023), named after a local term for the caves and tunnel systems. Once again full of experimental and visual mastery, in **UNDERGROUND** Oda discovers and peels back the subterranean spaces as a place of transgenerational memory of the battle for Okinawa in April 1945. While "peace guide" Mitsuo Matsunaga soberly recounts the fates of the civilians who sought refuge here from the bombardment by US troops, the "shadow", embodied by the young woman, glides through the caves, touching rock faces and traces of the past. Silently, with groping fingers. Kaori Oda superimposes memory culture and historical wounds in magical layers of images. The incomprehensible reports of collective suicide are framed by a sensual soundscape. **UNDERGROUND** depicts a life with shadows. (Fabian Tietke, Annina Lehmann)

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**Kaori Oda**, born in Osaka, Japan in 1987, is a filmmaker and artist. In 2016 she completed a Doctor of Liberal Arts in filmmaking in Sarajevo, supervised by Béla Tarr. **ARAGANE** (2015), shot in a Bosnian coal mine, premiered at Yamagata International Film Festival. **TOWARD A COMMON TENDERNESS** (2017) had its world premiere at DOK Leipzig and TS'ONOT / **CENOTE** (2019), shot in underwater caves in Yucatán, premiered in Rotterdam. **GAMA** (2023) screened at MoMA Doc Fortnight and Cinéma du Réel. Oda received the Nagisa Oshima Prize (2020) and the New Face Award of the Japanese Education Minister (2021).

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**Films:** 2010: *Thus a Noise Speaks*. 2014: *Ko Oh* (short film). 2015: *Aragane*. 2017: *Toward a Common Tenderness*. 2019: *TS'ONOT / Cenote*. 2023: *GAMA*. 2024: *Underground*.

### Director's Statement

#### Each and Every One of Us Has Lived Here

The traces we gaze at become a collective memory

Starting with my first film **THUS A NOISE SPEAKS** (2010), which concluded with the words "Surely we'll remember it someday", and followed by **FLASH** (2015), a short film that poses the question "What is the earliest memory I can recall?", I have continued my exploration of human memory. In **ARAGNE** (2015), I found the intangible memory embedded in material coal ore and its excavation, and in **CENOTE** (2019), I sought to uncover the collectivity of memory across time in water; both films are set in underground locations. I think I sensed that by going underground, I might find clues to something elusive, memory itself.

In my latest film **UNDERGROUND**, I have deepened my exploration of memory. During the production process, with exploring its collective and mutually constructive nature or its relation to "time", which is also something difficult to grasp, I asked myself why I wanted to preserve memories through the recording medium of film while interacting with other people. Humans will inevitably go extinct one day, and as long as we are human, you and I will surely die. Yet, I want to affirm that each and every one of us has lived here. Now I believe that this is why I seek to leave the film as a living trace.

In this film, we refer to something whose role is to journey through the living traces of the ancient past, the present, and the distant future as the "shadow". My aim was to use the shadow to connect the underground and the aboveground, the lost and the remaining, the living and the dead, thereby creating an image of "us". Death, loss, and the things left behind... In the underground, where these signs can be felt, the device of film has, for a moment, made frozen time move again. Spaces that have been hidden, covered, or concealed are brought to light by the eyes of the living. The living in this film are not only we, the filmmakers involved, but also the audience gazing at the screen.

The living traces, gazed at through the film and exposed to light, become a collective memory.

The strange phenomenon of "us" is renewed as the collective memory acquires a new layer.

Hopefully, my film will renew "us".

Kaori Oda

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### Interview

#### Close to the Collective Subconscious

**Kaori Oda speaks to Charlotte Hafner and Barbara Wurm about the connection between underground spaces, collective memories and filmmaking**

*Barbara Wurm: Kaori, we've met before, but have not discussed your film yet. I'm very happy that **UNDERGROUND**, after playing*

at Tokyo IFF, will have its international premiere at Berlinale Forum. Let me start by asking for how long this film has been on your mind.

Kaori Oda: We spent more than three years to make this film, from research to shooting and editing in post-production.

Charlotte Hafner: Is the history of the Battle of Okinawa and of the role of the gama (the Okinawa expression for cave) during and after the battle something that is generally known in Japan, or is it a chapter of history that has been forgotten?

KO: We do learn about the Battle of Okinawa at school, all of us. But there may be differences in perceptions among individuals depending on where they live. Some people know that the group suicide in Chibichirigama was mostly due to pressure from the Japanese military and some people might not know that. If you live on Okinawa Island, you know more about the Battle of Okinawa, of course.

CH: In **UNDERGROUND**, the history of the gama is told by a local guide, and I think it's a really wonderful choice to include this element of narration and oral storytelling in your film, which is all about memory and how it is passed down, how we preserve it. And especially the history of marginalized peoples, whose collective history is often only passed down through oral storytelling. Could you tell us a little bit about the guide? How did you meet him?

KO: His name is Mitsuo Matsunaga, and I found his homepage on the internet. He lives in Okinawa and works as a peace guide for students and for people who, like us, want to learn about the gama. He used to be a taxi driver, and on the job, he met Gushi-san. Gushi-san was a nurse at the Okinawa Army Hospital. He became a peace guide in 1988 after Gushi-san encouraged him to participate in the collection of remains in the cave. He met many people during this volunteer work who experienced the Battle of Okinawa and began to think that he would like to pass on their wartime experience to future generations.

CH: One story that really moved me in the film was that of Toshie Asato, who decided to share her story many years after the war was over, in 1977. The gama are also a space that preserves history, almost like a museum. And they're also, in a way, eyewitnesses of the tragedies that have happened there. They become portals that connect the past to the present. Could you tell us a little bit more about the techniques you used to show the portal-like qualities of the gama, and underground spaces in general?

CH: Let's talk about the shadow. I think it's an interesting element, which is new to your work as well, an element of performance.

KO: Before **UNDERGROUND** we made a middle-length film called GAMA, which was only the Okinawan part. And there was a shadow in the film as well. But like I said before, I wanted to merge different underground spaces across Japan into one underground space for the film. We've talked about war and Okinawa, but **UNDERGROUND** is not only about the gama. For me, it's about collective memory and our subconscious. And I wanted to have someone or something to create this intangible thing.

BW: The underground is a metaphor, it's a place, a space, and layers of memory. Can you talk more about this concept, how it helped you to combine these two spheres of the film, the material aspect, touching bones and touching walls and becoming the shadow, and the bigger overarching idea?

KO: People ask me why I'm attracted to caves or the underground, but I'm not so much into caves as such, but rather human memories, especially collective ones. And for me, going underground physically was somehow an opportunity to be

close to this collective consciousness or subconscious. The act of touching walls with the hand of the shadow connects to the image of cave paintings. And I was thinking, they left these paintings in order to say they were there. That was the beginning of the idea of playing with the hand and shadows, because the film is talking about leaving traces.

CH: There are ritualistic elements in the film as well. The scenes of prayer and of honoring the memory of the dead, but also the scenes in the apartment where we see rituals of everyday life, everyday routines. Could you talk a bit more about this aspect of the film?

KO: When I was thinking about how the audience would watch this film above ground, whether they would be able to relate these abstract images and sounds to themselves, I thought I should have scenes above ground, like making miso soup or doing yoga. The underground spaces and its memories are not at all distant from our daily lives, but everything is connected to the ground we live on now, like the plane going over the head of the shadow at the seashore in Okinawa. The shadows that seem to wander underground are also present in the depths of people living now.

CH: The scene on the beach where the shadow sits at the seashore and there is the noise of a plane flying over her was very powerful. I couldn't help but think about wartime planes. There was something really eerie about it. I think, right now, we live in a very unstable society, and there is constant war or conflict. Although we know about the horrors of the past, we keep making the same mistakes as a society. Was that also something that you thought about when you made **UNDERGROUND**?

KO: The beach is the one that the US military landed on when they arrived on Okinawa. And close to the beach, there was a military base. But we didn't expect there to be jets flying over us when we were filming. It was a military aircraft. Yoshigai-san, who plays the shadow, kept acting naturally and didn't stop making sounds with the dead corals. The coral remains look like human bones in a way, too. The sounds of the corals may not be as loud as the aircraft, but it's not like we cannot hear it. And to preserve this small sound, the small voices, was my mission in the film. We're not making political films, but every film is political because life is political, and in daily life, each of our choices is connected to politics. If we try to capture life, politics is always involved. That's my stance about the film's political aspects.

BW: In a way, you are bringing to life the many forgotten, unburied souls with this film, which is another layer of memory.

KO: That's why we wanted to show the fragments of dead corals on the beach, which look like bones. And in the first shot of the film, we project colorful grains. I used these grains to describe the small memories, wandering around underground.

BW: Working with the shadow, did you ask Nao Yoshigai to act in any particular way?

KO: I told her to listen Matsunaga-san, the guide, during the Okinawa scenes. But at the same time, she has to listen to the space itself, the space of the gama. I asked her to not react, but to be open to both – Matsunaga-san and the gama. But then, how she does that is up to her. It's not about emotions per se, but about her physicality.

CH: You also incorporated the element of cinema or cinema as another form of cave, in a way. Could you talk a bit about the scene inside the cinema?

KO: We shot the cinema with the hope that our film itself would be a living trace for the next generation to come. And that's what

Matsunaga-san does with his storytelling in the gama, the cave. We tried to do what he does, using the language of film, in the cinema. Also, I think we reflect ourselves when we watch films. I was playing around with this idea.

*BW: Yoshigai-san, who plays the shadow, like you is part of the younger generation and of contemporary discourse. I wonder how your generation thinks of this aspect of history. And how was the reception at the Tokyo International Film Festival?*

KO: Yoshigai-san is my age, mid 30s, almost 40. In Tokyo, I think most of the reactions were not so much about politics but about individuals like Matsunaga-san, about how precious it is to have him in the film. Also, the film language itself is very interesting for Japanese audiences. People were interested in that, how we constructed the underground in the form of the images and especially in the sound.

*CH: The soundscape of the film is very special. It's your second collaboration with Hayato Nagasaki, who also did the sound for CENOTE. Could you tell us a little bit about how you approached the sound of UNDERGROUND?*

KO: There are three people in the sound team. Hayato Nagasaki did the sound recording on location. Iwao Yamazaki did the sound design for **UNDERGROUND** in post-production. Finally, Miyu Hosoi made the soundtrack for the film. This film is the first film Miyu composed music for. I requested that she make the sound independent from the image, so that it could stand alone. The images are their own world, and the sounds should be their own world, too. When sound and image meet, it creates a third world, which belongs neither to image nor to sound. That's what we talked about when we were making the tracks.

*CH: In your œuvre, there's also some very personal works, such as the films you made under the guidance of Bela Tarr at his film school in Sarajevo. Are you planning to do more personal work in the future, or are you going to stick to the topic of collective memory for a bit longer?*

KO: I started filmmaking by shooting myself and my family. I chronicled my coming out as a sexual minority to my family because they rejected who I am. We used filmmaking to communicate again. After that struggle, I didn't know what to shoot anymore because I'm not coming from a cinephile background. But then I was lucky enough to enter the film factory in Sarajevo. Because I didn't have anything I could pull from myself, I needed to see the world, meet new people, and see what's going on outside of my space. I think that is why I made films like ARAGANE and CENOTE, and also **UNDERGROUND**. I was trying to pass on memories to the next generation. But right now, I'm going back to my mother again to make a small short film together, because our relationship is changing. And I realized that my mother will die. I mean, I will die too, but my mother will die before me. I want to record what she has been through. For me, she was always my mother, but I finally realized that she has a name.

*CH: That's really powerful. The way you use cinema as an archive is so incredible, preserving our histories and preserving our stories.*

KO: Thank you.