



A MAN VANISHES

A film by Shohei Imamura
An Icarus Films Release

"Critic's Pick! A mercurial mystery, a vertiginous drama and the very stuff of cinema." -- Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*

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LOGLINE

When a seemingly contented businessman disappears without a trace, his fiancé goes to great lengths to find him in this gorgeously photographed black-and-white film from master director and two-time Palme d'Or winner Shohei Imamura.

SYNOPSIS

One of the most important and complex works by two-time Palme d'Or winning director Shohei Imamura, *A Man Vanishes* began as an investigation into one of the thousands of missing persons cases that occur in Japan each year. The film follows the case of Tadashi, a handsome businessman who has suddenly vanished. Imamura and his crew interview the man's fiancée, Yoshie, who is desperately searching for him, and become increasingly involved in his life. But the "investigation" casts a shadow of doubt over the couple's relationship, Tadashi's business ventures, his relationship with Yoshie's sister, and even the investigating film director, Imamura himself, who may not be what he seems to be. The film culminates in a stunning scene that explodes any stable sense of fiction and reality. Radical film in scope, technique, and aesthetic, *A Man Vanishes* distills many of Imamura's central themes and obsessions and make it an early example of what film historian Donald Ritchie called, "One of Imamura's major themes: [the] confrontation of illusion with reality (and the resultant problem of telling which is which)."

PRESS QUOTES **A MAN VANISHES**

“Critic’s Pick! A mercurial mystery, a vertiginous drama and the very stuff of cinema.”

–**Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times***

“The explosively provocative film progressively and aggressively blurs distinctions between documentary and fiction.

A Man Vanishes was worth the 45-year wait.”

–**Ronnie Schieb, *Variety***

“*A Man Vanishes* is as much an heir to Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* as it is an augury of Kiarostami’s *Close-Up*... In retrospect, Imamura seems to have paved the world’s modern moviemaking crossroads.”

–**Jonathan Kiefer, *The Village Voice* and *LA Weekly***

“5/5 Stars! I can’t recommend this movie enough.”

–**Dave Fear, *Time Out New York***

“A real mold breaker [with] no obvious aesthetic precedent in Japan or anywhere else. As astonishing as it is rough-and-ready.”

–**Tony Rayns, *ArtForum***

“The great strength of this crafty film is that it questions, in a spectacular final twist, the cinema verite that it initially seemed to exemplify.”

–**Thierry M é r a n g e r, *Cahiers du cinema***

“Startlingly modern [and] not to be missed!”

–**Mike Hale, *The New York Times, Sunday Arts & Leisure***

ABOUT THE FILM BY NAOKI YAMAMOTO

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* (*Yūkoku*, 1965), it also began to explore the possibility of producing films. Upon hearing about this, the director Imamura Shōhei 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*).



A Man Vanishes, directed by Shohei Imamura. Photo courtesy Icarus Films.

EXCERPTS ON **A MAN VANISHES** FROM THE BOOK SHOHEI IMAURA (ED. JAMES QUANDT)

BY JAMES QUANDT:

“Echoing Godard, Imamura has said, ‘I’d like to destroy this premise that cinema is fiction;’ his ‘fiction’ films are based on real-life stories and on meticulous, detailed research that has earned Imamura a reputation as cultural anthropologist, while his ‘documentaries,’ most triumphantly *A Man Vanishes*, often incorporate so many narrative devices that they blur into impure invention.

“In a coup de cinéma that has been equaled only by Abbas Kiarostami’s *Close-Up*, [with *A Man Vanishes*] Imamura transforms fact into artifice, being into acting, personal identity into a tenuous fabrication.” –James Quandt in the book *Shohei Imamura*

BY TOICHI NAKATA:

“The extraordinary *A Man Vanishes* [(1967)] starts out as a documentary account of a search for a missing person and turns into a blend of fact and fiction unprecedented in world cinema.”

Excerpt from an interview with Shohei Imamura by Toichi Nakata:

Toichi Nakata: *The first of your films to blur the line between fiction and fact was A Man Vanishes which you made independently in 1967.*

Shohei Imamura: I made it for Imamura Productions, which I’d founded in 1965. The film was partly funded by the ATG (Art Theater Guild [of Japan]), a small organization which invested in and distributed low-budget independent features. My original intention was to investigate 26 cases of men who had disappeared, but it soon became clear that one case alone would be quite complicated enough to deal with. I centered the film on the case of Tadashi Oshima, who disappeared in 1965 while on a business trip. I learned about him through meetings with his fiancée Yoshi Hayakawa, and I soon guessed that Oshima had vanished because he wanted to get out of his obligation to marry her.

How did you go about researching it?

I always try to talk to people myself as much as I can. That can get boring sometimes I sense that there's something that needs to be explored further behind what they're saying. While making *A Man Vanishes*, my crew and I stayed in the room next door to Yoshie Hayakawa for a whole year. She had every imaginable bad quality, and none of us could really stand her. And yet I wanted to understand why I found her so disturbing, and that was enough to keep me going.

Did you ever think twice about using hidden cameras and exposing her and other people's private feelings in public?

Yoshie Hayakawa gave her explicit consent to being filmed. She took leave from her job to be in the film, and we paid her a salary. In other words, she approached the project as a job and she took on the role of an actress in front of the camera. She used the camera as much as we used her as subject. Of course, there are serious ethical questions involved. Hayakawa didn't know what the film's outcome would be, but we behind the camera didn't know where reality was going to lead us either. I'm not sure myself if the use of hidden cameras was justified, and I have to admit that the finished film did hurt Hayakawa's feelings. These are difficult areas, and I have no glib answers. As a filmmaker, though, I did what I had to do to see the film through completion. I put the needs of the film first. I had no other choice, really.

"[...Making *Profound Desire of the Gods* on Ishigaki Island,] my actors and actresses couldn't stand the protracted filming and began complaining about being stuck on the island for so long. I'd had my problems working with actors before, but on this occasion their complaints made me really fed up. Funny enough, I was so fed up that I lost all desire to make fiction films for many years.

"Also, I came out of *A Man Vanishes* with a feeling that fiction—no matter how close to reality—could never be as truthful as unmediated documentary. And documentary seemed a better vehicle for my unending desire to get close to people's true natures. I started with *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* in 1970, and then devoted myself to documentaries for some nine years. No actors to worry about. I simply travelled around with a skeleton crew; often just one cameraman and one sound recordist.

"[...]During the nine years I made documentaries, I was basically supported by my wife, who ran a company producing artwork for animation films. No one can make a living directing documentaries for Japanese television. In fact, it's impossible to make documentaries at all unless you are ready to sacrifice many things in your personal life."

BY ALLAN CASEBIER:

[Shohei] Imamura is important in Japanese cinema for the way in which he puts his Japanese audience in touch with matters deeply felt but not always fully realized. The Imamura film ferrets out what is unique in Japanese culture, while at the same time making salient its erosion by the influence of Westernization and modernization.

For Imamura there are a number of closely linked dichotomous concerns that represent conflicts present in and important to the condition of the Japanese. They are the irrational vs. the rational; the primitive vs. the civilized; the spontaneous vs. the conventional; the lower classes vs. the upper classes; the authentic vs. the contrived. In each case, Imamura believes the first of these conflicting elements to be the locus of value. Further, the first dichotomy holds a central place in his canon.

Despite the outward appearance of a rationally ordered, technologically efficient society, Japanese culture and consciousness are marked by a valuing of the irrational. ...For the Japanese, life itself is irrational in that it is ultimately mysterious and incapable of explanation by any mode of rational activity. Accordingly, one finds in Japanese culture a deeply embedded notion called *yugen*, which entails the presence of mystery and incomprehensibility in all things. Importantly, *yugen* is not only a metaphysical notion but also the source for aesthetic value in the Japanese conception of the arts. To place the appreciator of one's art in contact with an ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible texture, as Imamura does, is at once to make palpable the irrational in human nature and to achieve the quintessence of aesthetic value.

While Imamura's exploration of the irrational has specific meaning for his Japanese audiences, it nevertheless has significance for Westerners as well. Raised as we are to value the rational about all other qualities, we have come to equate, all too willingly and somewhat naively, rationality with reality. Imamura challenges this comfortable notion. [...]

The blurring of the distinction between fiction and reality forms the basis for a most memorable image of irrationality in *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen Johatsu*, 1957). This film involves a real-life search for a missing man, Tadashi Oshima, who had disappeared a year and a half earlier according to police records, leaving no trace. Shigeru Tsuyuguchi, a professional actor, and Yoshie, the missing man's fiancée, begin a search for Oshima, followed every step of the way by Imamura's camera. (Imamura often uses hidden cameras and wireless microphones to assist his effort to capture the reality of this event).

Complications immediately set in: an instrument of discovery sanctioned, not by rationality, but by superstition—a medium, a shaman—tells Yoshie that her sister Sayo knows what became of her missing fiancé, Oshima. Yoshie, however, begins to lose interest in the search and becomes romantically involved with the actor, Tsuyuguchi, who plays the role of investigator-interviewer. Coincident with these developments, evidence begins to accumulate suggesting that Sayo may have been responsible for the death of the missing Oshima.

In this context where real life obtrudes on the fictional texture, making it difficult to retain one's sense of the fictional as opposed to the documentary, Imamura brings about a most dynamic confrontation between the two sisters in a carefully constructed teahouse. The sisters know they are being filmed, but they do not realize the larger fictional and real life dimensions implied. Evidence is presented belying Sayo's denials of involvement with Oshima, thereby implicating her in a web of suspicion about her role in his disappearance. Yoshie turns to Imamura in distress asking, "What is truth?" He replies, "I don't know," then claps his hands as he shouts "Set," signaling that the teahouse set around the sisters is to disappear. The walls of the teahouse fall, revealing that Yoshie and Sayo are stranded in the middle of a gigantic sound stage. Imamura remarks on the situation as follows:

You think this set is a kind of truth because it looks like a nice, comfortable room; but it's not—it's a fiction built in a film studio. You think you are fighting with your sister because you are looking for the truth, but in fact you would never be confronting each other like this if the film weren't being made.

The dismantling of the tea house set most dramatically highlights Imamura's caption of what is happening.

Already the audience has sensed Tsuyuguchi's unease in his role in the documentary-fiction, or whatever it is that we are experiencing. Odd enough, for an actor to be playing a real-life investigator in a search for a missing man, but to have the real-life fiancée of the missing man fall in love with him and have her sister so clearly suspected of the missing man's disappearance is most distressing. Meanwhile, the fiancée constitutes a challenge to our sense of how to relate to the film. Not only does she cross over the line between fiction and reality in relation to the actor, but she also begins to identify with being an actress rather than a real-life fiancée seeking her missing boyfriend. Moreover, she has become a bewildered woman, suspecting her own sister of murder.

The image of the teahouse set disintegrating before our eyes into a sound stage seemingly on cue as Yoshie asks Imamura "What is truth?" leaves the audience with a blurred sense of the line between reality and fiction in the film—precisely

the kind of teasing circumstance Imamura thrives upon. A rational ordering of the experience of a film would involve no such complication or ambiguity. Some films are fictional in nature. They give dramatization to events, objects, and human characters. Other films are documentaries which present some reality on the basis of available evidence. In *A Man Vanishes*, Imamura will give us neither fiction nor documentary per se, but rather a curious mixture of both. Also, the word of a shaman does not count in a rational explanation of the disappearance of an individual, but in the world of *A Man Vanishes*, this is what we are given side by side with compelling rational evidence pointing in the same direction. Ordinarily, actors play roles in fiction while real-life individuals are the subjects in front of the camera in documentaries. In *A Man Vanishes* an actor can become a real-life subject, and a real-life subject can become an actress. Moreover, in this “documentary,” the direction the narrative takes is discovered, not known from the outset. At the end, Yoshie assumes the role of directing the final scene, re-enacting a confrontation with her sister with the damning evidence. All of this unsettles our attempts at a rational ordering of what we experience.

Thus, here we are, out in the street, out in the real world it were, with the extraordinary complication that the real-life fiancée-cum-actress now has become the director of the film. In the street, the “search” continues. Imamura announces, “We now accept that this film is a fiction, a drama, and we will start from there.” Yoshie gathers the witnesses to her sister’s purported affair with her missing fiancé and declares, “We are here to learn the truth.” As she directs, with Sayo’s cooperation, the re-enactment of a scene in which a delivery boy says he spotted Sayo and Oshima entering a building—a matter Sayo will not admit to—cameras, microphones, and clapboards are all clearly visible. After much presenting of further denials by her, everyone waves goodbye and leaves. Yoshie offers the following summary impression: “I can’t believe anything. That’s the toughest thing—not being able to believe anything. I wish she were not my sister.” The frame then freezes as Yoshie says, “I guess this is the end.” The actor-investigator-interviewer-object of Yoshie’s affection then says: “Yes, we’re out of time. The film is over, but not your life. What will you do tomorrow?” Yoshie replies, “I don’t know.” At this point, the film ends. The audience, having been so effectively touched by an irrational texture, leaves the theatre. The final scene cannot be rationally sorted out.

FILM CREDITS

Directed by Shohei Imamura

Produced by Shohei Imamura

Screenplay by Shohei Imamura, Kiriro Urayama

Original Music by Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cinematography by Kenji Ishiguro

Editing by Matsuo Tanji

Lighting by Fumio Matsushita

Art Direction / Production Design by Ichiro Takada

Sound by Kunio Takeshige, Kenichi Benitani

Featuring
Yoshie Hayakawa
Shigeru Tsuyuguchi
Sayo Hayakawa
and Shohei Imamura

Produced by
Art Theatre Guild of Japan
Imamura Productions / Comme des Cinema
Nihon Eiga Shinsha

English Title: *A Man Vanishes*
Japanese Title: *Ningen jōhatsu* / 人間蒸発
1967 / Japan / 130 mins / Black & White / Aspect Ratio: 1:1.33
In Japanese with English Subtitles

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SHOHEI IMAMURA FILMOGRAPHY

Stolen Desire 1958
Nishi Ginza Station 1958
Endless Desire 1958
My Second Brother 1969
Pigs and Battleships 1961
The Insect Woman 1963
Intentions of Murder aka Unholy Desire 1964
The Pornographers: Introduction to Anthropology 1966
A Man Vanishes* 1967
The Profound Desire of the Gods 1968
A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess 1970
In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Malaysia* 1971
In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Thailand* 1971
The Pirates of Bubuan* 1972
Outlaw-Matsu Returns Home* 1973
Karayuki-san, The Making of a Prostitute* 1975
Two Men Named Yoshinobu 1975
In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers, Part III 1971
Vengeance is Mine 1979
Eijanaika aka Why Not? 1981
The Ballad of Narayama 1983
Zengen aka The Pimp 1987
Black Rain 1989
The Eel 1997
Dr. Akagi 1988
Warm Water Under a Red Bridge 2001
11'9"01 September 11 (Segment : "Japan") 2002

*Now distributed in North America by Icarus Films

IMAMURA ON IMAMURA

"A documentary is always a voyage into the unknown. You never know where it will lead you." —Shohei Imamura

"I like to make messy films." —Shohei Imamura

"I'm interested in people: strong, greedy, humorous, deceitful people who are very human in the qualities and their failings." —Shohei Imamura

"I don't like too perfect a cinema." —Shohei Imamura

PRESS QUOTES SHOHEI IMAMURA

"A supremely assured artist, and one who is at home, even intimate, with his (and our) most basic instincts. [Imamura spent] his life and his career in stubborn resistance to everything—ideology, formal convention, squeamishness about the unpleasant truths of human nature—that might constrain his creative impulses." —Terrence Rafferty, *The New York Times*

"Not merely a great filmmaker, but one of the greatest artists in the history of cinema." —John Harkness, *Now Magazine*

"Humanist, iconoclast, "anthropologist," investigator and innovator, Imamura has produced a body of work over the past four decades that is unequalled for its audacious insights into Japanese society, its tumultuous energy and formal daring. —James Quandt, *Shohei Imamura*

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