


Case study

Don't teach: exploring the irreducibilities of film education through Japan's Children Meet Cinema project in conversation with Etsuko Dohi

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the innovative Japanese film education project Children Meet Cinema, through aspects of an interview with its founder Etsuko Dohi, placed within a wider discussion of the project's pedagogical approaches. In particular, the article details the innovative manner in which Children Meet Cinema has invited some of Japan's leading film-makers – among them, Nobuhiro Suwa, Hirokazu Koreeda and Naomi Kawase – to engage with children making films for the first time.

Keywords film education; Japan; Children Meet Cinema; Nobuhiro Suwa; Alicia Vega

The film-maker and theorist Pier Paolo Pasolini theorised a sense of the irreducible quality of images within film-making, and the manner in which, in constructing its aesthetics, cinema draws from material, empirical experience:

The cinema represents reality with reality; it is metonymic and not metaphoric. Reality doesn't need metaphors to express itself. If I want to express you, I express you through yourself,

I couldn't use metaphors to express you. In the cinema it is as though reality expressed itself with itself, without metaphors, and without anything insipid and conventional and symbolic. (Stack, 2018: n.p.)

Pasolini's words find a certain echo within discussions of Children Meet Cinema, a Japanese programme of film education that, at the time of writing, has been active for almost two decades. Speaking at the 2021 Scottish International Film Education Conference (SIFEC), the Children Meet Cinema founder, Etsuko Dohi, similarly remarked upon the singularity of cinematic images, considering a still image of Junoa, a small girl in big headphones and a pink dress, mouth open and left hand pointing towards the sky:

What makes an image unique? That is [the sense of] irreplaceability. The girl in the ... image is Junoa, who was 8 years old at that time. What the camera captures is not a girl, [in the sense of] the common noun, but *the girl named Junoa*. It is Junoa, not anyone else. I think this expresses the irreplaceable character of images. And in film-making too, we place importance on who makes film. If the child who is filming or recording is replaced, by a different child, then a different film will be made. (SIFEC, 2021: n.p.)

Dohi goes on to detail how, within Children Meet Cinema's approach to film education, each child themselves is considered irreplaceable:

Throughout our film classes, we keep saying, you are special and this film needs you. Various children come to our film classes. In particular, there are children who have no place in [school], and children who are excluded. We listen carefully to their voices, and keep telling them that you are essential to make this film. When the children are accepted, they will have a sense of self-respect. This will be a great support in their lives. (SIFEC, 2021: n.p.)

Positioning in montage Pasolini's conception of the cinematic real and Dohi's discussion of the simultaneous singularity of the child and the image in which they are depicted prompts the question (as discussed elsewhere [Chambers, 2022a; Daly et al., 2020]) as to whether film's affordances and limitations as a medium allow a uniqueness of scope in serving as a vehicle for fostering self-esteem in young people. While such questions are beyond the scope of this article, they underlie considerations of Children Meet Cinema, a project which, under Dohi's leadership, has established a significant presence across Japan since its inception in 2004. Over two decades, Children Meet Cinema has formulated a particularised approach to film pedagogy that – while in dialogue with the work of Alicia Vega in Chile, alongside that of Alain Bergala and Nathalie Bourgeois with the Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse (CAAJ) project in France – retains a distinct identity of its own, in particular through encouraging regular interactions between young people and some of Japan's most celebrated film-makers, such as Nobuhiro Suwa and Hirokazu Koreeda.

Drawing upon a series of conversations with Etsuko Dohi conducted between 2021 and early 2023, this article presents an overview of Children Meet Cinema's film education practice to date, in the conviction that such an account will provide a rich source of inspiration and provocation for film educators elsewhere in the world. In the following discussion, a brief timeline of key developments within the organisation and delivery of Children Meet Cinema is followed by more in-depth accounts of three principle forms of delivery – craft workshops, watching workshops and film-making workshops – with particular attention paid to some of the encounters between Japan's leading auteurs and young film-makers making films for the first time.

A timeline of Children Meet Cinema

The roots of Children Meet Cinema are found in close proximity to both the Japanese and the international film industries. Initially working as publicist for the international distribution company Eurospace (and, as such, working with celebrated film-makers such as Abbas Kiarostami and Leos Carax), Etsuko Dohi

latterly went on to become the owner of Cinémonde, a small, 90-seat cinema in Kanazawa City, located on the fourth floor of Korinbo Tokyu Square, below the Kanazawa Tokyu Hotel. Dohi's first experiences of film education arose as a result of increased interface with local civic institutions. Given the difficulties in sustaining even the smallest of art-house cinemas within the digital era, and aware of European models of civic funding, Dohi sought support for Cinémonde from Kanazawa's local government. With the allocation of public funds came an expectation that Dohi would seek greater accessibility for the cinema's activities beyond Cinémonde's small, loyal audience of cinephiles. The imperative to seek a greater engagement with Kanazawa's local community, and Dohi's own personal experiences of introducing her own three children to cinema, led her to conceive of Children Meet Cinema.

Initial inspiration for the new programme's structure and content came from Chilean film educator Alicia Vega, whose work has featured elsewhere in *Film Education Journal* (Vega, 2020). Interestingly, it was not in written form that Vega's approach to film pedagogy reached Dohi, but, perhaps appropriately, through film itself, through Ignacio Agüero's celebrated documentary *Cien niños esperando un tren* (*One Hundred Children Waiting for a Train*, 1988). The film was well received in Japan at Yamagata Documentary Film Festival, where it won a prize, and it was subsequently picked up by the film distribution company Eurospace, where Dohi worked at the time. As its title – referencing the Lumière brothers' famous *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896) – suggests, Vega's approach to film education draws upon forms of early and pre-cinema in helping young people grasp a sense of both the mechanics and the materiality of the moving image in its most primitive, essential forms, through both film screenings and more tactile exercises in which children play with, and themselves learn how to create, pre-cinema 'toys' such as zoetropes, thaumatropes and magic rolls (Vega, 2020).

Mounting a detailed study of Agüero's film (during which she describes 'writing down what [Vega] did image by image, one by one') in order to adopt a similar approach, Dohi was initially concerned that, given the significant differences in sociocultural context between the relatively marginalised communities in which Vega was working in Chile and the more affluent contexts in which Dohi herself initially began working in Japan, transplanting Vega's methodology to Kanazawa would not work. Such concerns were quickly allayed, however, during Children Meet Cinema's inaugural delivery in 2004, wherein a project initially motivated more by pragmatic considerations soon took on a momentum and sense of purpose of its own, buoyed by positive responses from the project's participating children and staff.

Beginning in 2004, Children Meet Cinema initially offered two forms of workshops: *craft* workshops (focusing on the sort of tactile activities of zoetrope and magic roll making drawn from Vega's teaching in Chile) and *viewing* workshops, again drawing aspects of inspiration from Vega, albeit focusing more on watching and responding to films. Motivated by a conviction of the importance of covering both film appreciation and film production, in 2007, Dohi took the initiative of introducing a further strand of workshops focused on film-making. Here, she again initially felt uneasy in stepping beyond the precedent established by Vega, worrying whether the omission of practical film-making within the latter's pedagogy reflected a degree of unseen reasoning. Happily, such concerns were again allayed during the first year of delivery in 2007, and *film-making* workshops subsequently became a regular fixture of Children Meet Cinema's annual activities. Starting in 2007, Children Meet Cinema ran craft workshops, watching workshops and film-making workshops once a year in Kanazawa for elementary school students (age 6–12 years). Film-making workshops lasted for three days and – as discussed in detail below – in each subsequent year have sought the involvement of a significant Japanese film director as a guiding influence upon the creative brief pursued by the children in their film-making.

In 2019, Japan's Ministry of Culture invited Children Meet Cinema to begin delivering two out of their three forms of film education – viewing and film-making workshops – in primary and secondary schools in the west of Japan. For the first six years of this partnership, workshops were delivered in a total of 6 schools per year (1 junior high school [12–15 year olds] and 5 elementary schools [6–12 year olds]). As of 2022, this partnership has expanded, with 14 schools, spread across both the west and north of Japan, consisting of 3 junior high schools and 11 elementary schools, interestingly retaining a bias towards

primary students. Participating schools are selected by Children Meet Cinema's governmental partners in the Ministry of Culture, specifying from a list of schools who have expressed interest in participating, with final choices frequently oriented by logistical factors such as geographical proximity. This school-based strand of Children Meet Cinema's workshop provision alone involves the efforts of between 15 and 17 staff (film-makers, camera-operators, editors and university students), who travel in caravans across Japan in order to deliver workshops at the schools identified by the Ministry of Culture.

Two further aspects of Children Meet Cinema's evolution as a project are worthy of note. Beginning in 2017, alongside the film-making workshops conducted in Kanazawa, the project additionally began to deliver a further strand of film-making workshops at the Tokyo International Film Festival. Like their counterparts in Kanazawa, these workshops have also featured the annual participation of a significant film-maker from Japan's film industry (Nobuhiro Suwa in 2017, Akiko Ohku in 2018, Kyoshi Sugita in 2019, Sho Miyake in 2020, Natsuki Seta in 2021, Chie Hayakawa in 2022 and Tetsuya Mariko in 2023), tasked with providing a brief for the children's film-making. Finally, doubtless recognising a significant degree of commonality of approach and priority, in 2017, Children Meet Cinema also began to participate in the celebrated French film education project CCAJ (which has enjoyed significant discussion both in the pages of *Film Education Journal* [Chambers, 2018, 2020; Donnelly et al., 2018; Henzler, 2018; Reid, 2018] and elsewhere [Cannon, 2018; Reid, 2019]), travelling to Paris once a year with a group of young people, again guided by Nobuhiro Suwa.

Having provided an overview of Children Meet Cinema's evolution over the two decades it has operated to date, discussion now turns to a more detailed consideration of the two workshop formats – craft and watching workshops – with which the programme began in 2004.

Japan in conversation with Chile: craft and watching workshops

As detailed above, one of the two workshop formats through which Children Meet Cinema was inaugurated in 2004 was that drawing most directly upon the precedent of Alicia Vega's work, as glimpsed in *One Hundred Children Waiting for a Train*: film education premised upon making and playing with cinematic 'toys' such as zoetropes.

While not tending to follow a fixed format, craft workshops typically begin with a screening of the Lumière brothers' film *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, which serves both to situate participants at the dawn of film history, and to bring the group together. As Dohi describes:

We establish a sense of *mise en scène*: that the children are going to see *the first film in the world*. We tell the children that [when they saw it], the audience thought it was real. I ask the children: 'What happened, that first time? Please imagine that you have never before seen a moving image. You have seen photographs, but not moving images.' The children imagine, and usually someone says, '[The audience] would have run away.' And I say, 'Well, let's do that together.' So we watch the film again, and, when the train arrives, we all start to run away together. This is kind of an icebreaker, allowing us to talk and move our bodies. (Conversation with author)

Following this lively introduction, the children then watch longer films, whether these are silent films similarly taken from the early history of world cinema, or later work, such as the films of Czech animator Jiří Brdečka, or Yuri Norstein's seminal *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975), a film that has frequently been featured in the workshops of Children Meet Cinema (and in CCAJ). These films serve not only to get the children talking about films, but also to illustrate that there is no one correct response. Rather, there is always a series of different impressions, responses and reactions. As Dohi notes, 'We say to the children that this is normal. The responses are different because you are all different.'

The workshop subsequently integrates more hands-on, creative tasks that seek, in some way, to respond to films the children have watched. Sometimes, following Alicia Vega's precedent, this involves

making certain forms of pre-cinema zoetropes, magic rolls or flip books, or, indeed, exploring primitive forms of projection using black boxes and pinholes of light. At other times, the children are encouraged to paint scenes they have just seen, such as from Albert Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* (1956), another film that appears relatively frequently in Children Meet Cinema's work.

Throughout the craft workshops, a sense of occasion is cultivated: the children are told that they are going to see something special, whether this is the first film in the world, or the magical manner in which seemingly disparate images come together to create the impression of movement. As mentioned above, Dohi was apprehensive that the comparatively privileged children of Kanazawa (in contrast to the children from the marginalised communities in Chile that Alicia Vega is seen working with in *One Hundred Children Waiting for a Train*) would not be as struck by the uncanny, magical qualities of pre-cinema, regarding how separate images come together to create the impression of movement:

I thought maybe that the primitive joy for children of seeing moving pictures would not be present here in Japan. I was wrong, and it surprised me. We said to the children, 'You will make a film, with your hands', and it made them very excited. The moment when they saw the zoetrope – the horse running, or the dolphin jumping – the children would cry, 'This is a movie! We see a movie.' It was amazing, and, after this, I understood that it is not different – children in 2000s Japan or 1980s Chile, and for adults even. For everyone, there is a joy in making moving images. (Conversation with author)

Alongside these craft workshops, and marking a first, early departure from Alicia Vega, Dohi established 'watching' workshops in which children focus more on the experience of watching cinema, without the same degree of haptic, tactile activities of the craft workshops. In the 18 years that Children Meet Cinema has been delivering watching workshops, Dohi notes a significant degree of evaluation and development in both form and content. The essential premise, however, remains largely the same: watching workshops focus on one particular film (*The Red Balloon* and *Hedgehog in the Fog* have frequently been used, as has Yasujirō Ozu's *Good Morning* [1959]), to which participants are asked to respond in a variety of ways. These workshops are frequently based in schools, and are designed to be able to accommodate a large number of students (at times, over a hundred), who are split up into teams of around five students each. The children are asked to respond to the film through a series of exercises in which they become aware of the role of their own active responses, as audience members, in shaping their experience of the films. Again using the example of Lamourisse's *The Red Balloon* (as recorded in a behind-the-scenes documentary made by Children Meet Cinema, in which Nobuhiro Suwa is seen teaching at Shinjo Primary School in Susaki City), the children are first asked to participate in the 'game of remembering a film', during an exercise that serves to render tangible their own memories of different events in the film, and the order in which they happen. An enormous piece of paper – around a metre wide and three metres long – is held up at the front of the room. Children are asked, in the first instance, to recall all the different locations present in the film (the school, the church, the apartment, the bakery and so on) and to write all these on yellow Post-it notes. They are then given three minutes to put them in the correct order – and thus in the correct place – on the timeline (which runs from left to right) before the countdown runs out. Here, cinematic time and the narrative shape of a film are expressed through visual analogy, and certain key images on the enormous work chart allow the children to orient themselves as to where they are within the film's chronology. Next, the children are asked to think about characters in the film (the mother, the teacher and so on), which are written on blue Post-it notes, and again placed left to right on the timeline in terms of where they appear, taking into account the earlier positioning of locations. Following this, a final round of Post-it notes in a different colour asks the children to identify particular events and significant occurrences in the film, again in the order in which they are seen.

After this initial construction of narrative chronology, the children are asked to think about the film again, this time considering what the balloon is *feeling* at different junctures of the film. The children cut the shapes of balloons out of coloured card, and write on these the emotions of the balloon – frequently

expressed as things that the balloon says (for example, 'I am scared of Pascal's friend') – which they are again asked to place on the timeline at the moment in the film's narrative chronology at which these emotions occur. This discussion of what the balloon is feeling is subsequently used to illustrate to the children a fundamental aspect of how audience spectatorship operates within cinema, and the role that the audience plays in enacting the diegesis of the film, as Dohi describes:

Mr Suwa asked, after the children [had written] the feelings of red balloon, he said: 'Is this in the film? Is this what red ball says?' And [the children] say, 'No.' 'So [how] can you understand the feeling of the red balloon? Whose feelings are these?', the children are asked. And they realise: it is *their* feelings. *They* gave the feelings to this red balloon. It means the audience is not just an audience: the audience makes the film. The audience completes the film. (SIFEC, 2021: n.p.)

The use of such simple, lucid means to illustrate a profound, fundamental aspect of cinema as a medium – that the audience themselves actively collaborate in the act of cinema (mirroring Alexander McKendrick's [2006: xxxv] observation that 'film is a medium ... [and] it is my habit to remind students that film is not just something up there on the screen – it's a happening in your head ... it must end as it began: a response in the mind of a single viewer') – recalls Alain Bergala's (2016) similar propensity, as glimpsed in moments both in *The Cinema Hypothesis* and in CCAJ, for establishing crucial points of access to deep aspects of aesthetic comprehension that are nonetheless direct, simple and relatively easy for 8 year olds and 28 year olds alike to understand (Chambers, 2018, 2022b). As Dohi continues, 'if there are a hundred children, and they are watching *Hedgehog in the Fog*, there is not one film but a hundred here. And this is the idea we want to teach: that it is not a passive thing to watch a film. It's very active.'

Children Meet Cinema's pedagogical approach in this respect is reminiscent of Vega's similarly direct means of addressing the question of representation within cinema:

Our first contact session with the children focuses on exploring what an image is. I usually take a blown-up photo of a hat, and ask them to tell me what it is. They all shout aloud, 'a hat'. Then, as if by magic, I bring out a top hat from a basket and ask them again if they can tell me what it is. 'A hat', they reply in unison. When I ask them which of the two hats is the real one, they immediately realise that the former is only the image of a hat, whereas the latter is the real thing. Soon afterwards, they try it on and walk around the classroom with it on their heads. (Vega, 2020: 89)

Dohi emphasises that Children Meet Cinema does not seek to explain films, or teach correct interpretations or vocabulary. It does not seek, for example, to impart a standardised vocabulary of shot types, or to highlight the specific characteristics of film-makers (such as Ozu's tendency to use low angles). Rather, it simply seeks to encourage children to cultivate and become more aware of their own responses to films, a notably non-directionist approach that Children Meet Cinema explores to an even greater extent in its approach to practical film-making, as we will now consider.

Film-making workshops

Children Meet Cinema's approach to practical film-making education with young learners is shaped by a striking, fundamental policy: don't teach. As Dohi describes:

[An] important policy in Children Meet Cinema is that adults should not interfere, should not teach. Children can do most things the same way adults do. They just need more time. Therefore, we do not teach how to make films, but rather create an environment where children can go about freely, and [then] we watch with faith as they discover film as their own. This is very important to us, because there is no right answer in art. We don't want to place adults above children. (Conversation with author)

While many of the film education projects detailed in the pages of *Film Education Journal* and elsewhere seek – to varying extents – to empower learner agency and achieve a sense that the film was ‘made by the children themselves’ (Chambers, 2019: 27), Children Meet Cinema’s committedly non-interventionist approach can, by comparison, be considered somewhat radical.

While Dohi maintains that her staff do not teach children, this does not mean that young people are left entirely to their own devices. In a manner that, to an extent, resembles the changing, annual themes of CCAJ, each year, Children Meet Cinema’s film-making workshops explore a different theme, serving to act as a prompt or provocation for the imagination. A crucial difference, however, from CCAJ is that, rather than being produced by a centralised committee (that, frequently, is led by Alain Bergala [Reid, 2019]), Children Meet Cinema’s annual theme is proposed by a participating film-maker, who temporarily joins Dohi and the project’s wider team in order to provide aspects of support, inspiration and provocation for the programme’s young learners. Here, again, Dohi’s previous involvement with the Japanese film industry would seem to be a significant factor, both in Children Meet Cinema’s proximity to the Japanese film industry and, indeed, in securing an impressive roster of Japanese film directors to participate in the project. As Dohi notes herself, however, as Children Meet Cinema has gathered momentum, profile and reputation, it has become increasingly easy to find film-makers who are willing to participate.

Children Meet Cinema’s guest director thus decides, following an extensive series of conversations with Dohi and the programme team, what the theme motivating the film-making within each workshop will be (and whether the children’s film-making will assume a register of fiction, documentary or a hybrid approach of the two). Dohi feels that it is important for each director to follow their own instincts and to draw upon their own particular approach to film-making in establishing the theme of each workshop. Directors who have participated to date in Children Meet Cinema’s core Kanazawa film-making workshops (which tend to take place at the end of March), and the themes each has proposed, are as follows: Yuji Nakae (2007; documentary or fiction; ‘Love’); Hirokazu Koreeda (2008; documentary or fiction; fiction theme: ‘Family’, documentary theme: ‘Work’); Kôji Hagiuda (2009; documentary or fiction; ‘Be moved’); Nobuhiro Suwa (2010; fiction only; ‘If...’); Shin Togashi (2011; fiction only; theme: ‘Somebody meets somebody/something’, with an additional background theme of ‘To communicate’); Naomi Kawase (2012; documentary–fiction hybrid; ‘Find the protagonist in town’); Kôji Hagiuda (2013; documentary or fiction; ‘Lie’); Takuji Suzuki (2014; fiction; ‘Dream’); Tetsu Maeda (2015; fiction; ‘Time’); Nami Iguchi (2016; fiction; ‘Bring your favourite scenes’); Rikiya Imaizumi (2017; fiction; ‘Be troubled’); Masahide Ichii (2018; fiction; ‘Exchange’); Kohei Igarashi (2019; fiction; ‘Listen to the voice of place’); and – following a two-year hiatus during the Covid-19 pandemic – Natsuki Seta (2022; fiction; ‘Discover’) and Yukiko Sode (2023; fiction; ‘Anger’). Elsewhere, the following directors have participated in Kodomeiga film-making workshops held as part of the Tokyo International Film Festival: Nobuhiro Suwa (2017), Akiko Ohku (2018), Kyoshi Sugita (2019), Sho Miyake (2020), Natsuki Seta (2021), Chie Hayakawa (2022) and Tetsuya Mariko (2023).

Beyond the input of each year’s participating film-maker, further support comes from Children Meet Cinema’s team of professional film-makers and students, who support the young people’s film-making work. Rather than telling the children what to do, however, the project’s staff are instructed to ask questions. Dohi recounts how:

We don’t say, ‘You must do this.’ We rather pose the question: ‘What do you want to do?’ If they ask us, ‘How can we do this?’, we repeat the question back to them: ‘How, indeed, might you do this?’ From this, they understand that they must think by themselves, and they start to talk to each other. (Conversation with author)

Dohi finds that Children Meet Cinema’s rule of ‘don’t teach’ can be a struggle for some of the adult film-makers when working with children as part of the project for the first time. Following this rule, adult

facilitators are themselves deliberately not given any training in how to approach their work with the project's young participants. As Dohi describes:

The first time, [the facilitators] are in the same position as the children, because no one teaches them. So they are very anxious, but they must find the way by themselves. I put staff in the team of children and tell them: 'Don't teach. You don't have the answers. [The children] have the answers. You must support them, but not lead them.' (Conversation with author)

Dohi elaborates that one aspect of advice that she does offer, however, is for facilitators to hold off providing any advice to the young people until at least half a day has passed. At this point, she feels, if there is a sense that the young people in question have managed to form a collective way of working as a group, then offering advice as an adult is less damaging, because the group are likely to have the confidence to reject advice that they do not want. However, in her experience, if adults present themselves as being 'the centre of the circle' right from the outset, then the collaborative connections between the children themselves do not work to the same extent, and the children address themselves predominantly to the adult. Dohi does encourage her staff to intervene, however, in moments in which the project's young participants are not taking things seriously, or not approaching their work in a focused manner. At this point, she feels, adult facilitators can reasonably ask, 'Really, you think this is OK?' or, 'You would be happy to put this on the big screen in front of other people?' or, indeed, to offer encouragement in instances when group morale is low.

Children Meet Cinema's film-making work covers both documentary and fiction forms. Documentaries tend to be filmed in smaller groups of approximately four children, where each has a specific purpose (one on camera, one on sound, one directing and so on), whereas fiction films tend to be made by slightly larger groups of six to eight students, to account for actors and the sometimes greater technical demands of fiction film-making. Editing the children's films tends to take place in very small groups – with one or two students focusing on the edit (allowing those students the space to fully concentrate on their creative decisions), while the rest of the team work on making a poster for the film. The children themselves choose who edits and who makes the poster, and the former are subsequently supported by a facilitator from Children Meet Cinema's team. The project's approach to editing depends on each individual facilitator. Particularly when working with younger participants, some use Post-it notes on which the children are asked to write every shot they remember, which can then be assembled on to a timeline not dissimilar to that employed within Children Meet Cinema's watching workshops. Other facilitators use written notes, while some choose not to write anything down (whether on Post-it notes or otherwise), simply watching through rushes several times, before then relying on the children's memories to guide them in terms of what is significant and worthy of use.

Children Meet Cinema's facilitators frequently find that children instinctively have a sense of where each cut should be made, using verbal cues (saying, together, 'now' at the moment where it feels like a shot should be cut) in order to relay their decisions to adult facilitators. Older students (such as those aged 11–12) tend to be more able to use the computer without adult direction, and, in these instances, facilitators simply show the children how to conduct basic operations using the software themselves. Otherwise, the role of professional facilitators within post-production is mainly to ask questions that prompt the children's imagination and decision making, such as, 'How do you want to achieve that?' or, 'Where do you want to put this shot', which allow the project's young participants to quickly come to understand the function and purpose of editing. Dohi describes how Children Meet Cinema's facilitators encourage children, in particular, to look upon editing as 'finding the treasure', requiring one to look very closely, and in detail. Sometimes, aspects of treasure can be found in material initially dismissed for other reasons, requiring the children to look again and again. Children are encouraged to overlook small imperfections (such as microphones in shot), if there is perceived to be treasure in other aspects of a shot, such as performance. As Dohi says, 'If the actor was good, it's OK,

the imperfections don't matter, because the audience concentrates on what is important in the film.' Children Meet Cinema's approach to editing has changed since the film-making workshops began in 2007. Initially, editing was a more compartmentalised task taking place later in the process, whereas now – following the project's broad approach of experiential, non-directed learning – aspects of editing take place throughout the period the children are filming, for, as Dohi has found, once the children have some experience of editing, they subsequently have a greater understanding of what they need to collect while they are filming.

Having now provided an understanding about the broad manner in which Children Meet Cinema approaches film-making with young people, the following discussion provides a series of anecdotal accounts of different years of the film-making workshop, as guided by a series of celebrated Japanese film directors.

Children meet Yuji Nakae, Hirokazu Koreeda, Kôji Hagiuda, Nobuhiro Suwa and Naomi Kawase

During the first year of Children Meet Cinema's film-making workshops, led by the film-maker Yuji Nakae, workshops took place at the Kanazawa 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, a space that the project was able to use freely. Following the theme of 'Love' within a register of documentary, Nakae told the young (aged 6–12) film-makers that they must find a couple within the museum, ask them 'Are you a couple?' and then ask them to kiss each other. Dohi notes how, within Japan's somewhat restrained public social mores, it is considered out of the ordinary to kiss in front of other people and – as such – a public kiss was in itself a moment embodying a certain sense of spectacle or theatre. Running the workshop, Dohi and a colleague were careful not to tell the children what to do with the camera, while still affording the children an early opportunity to practise their documentary approach on some of Children Meet Cinema's team. Dohi describes how the children quickly understood that they must introduce themselves and explain the purpose behind their film, if they wanted to ensure open responses, rather than appearing with a camera and immediately asking adults they did not know to kiss.

During the interview sequences, Dohi and other staff hid, in order to allow the children free agency in the way they were approaching their encounters with potential participants, in terms of camera and direction. On the children's first attempt, a very embarrassed young couple were asked to kiss. Initially reticent, the couple were latterly implored to kiss by the children; they eventually did so, and they were gratefully thanked by the film-makers, all on camera. On taking the footage back to the space in which the workshops were taking place in order to watch their rushes, the children were asked by facilitators what they thought of their own work. Seeing their work on a screen, the children realised that not only was their footage very dark (so much so that the faces of the young couple, and the climactic kiss, were not fully legible), but the camera was also moving a great deal. This subsequently led the children, on their own accord, to seek – during their next attempt – to maintain a steadier camera, while also asking the next couple if they were willing to move a little more into the light before the interview began. Further, the young people soon came to realise that it was easier to film each of the couples if they were sitting down, leading them to further aspects of direction, asking prospective couples if they would sit in particular places before shooting began in earnest. The young people's interview technique also developed, from initially asking couples to kiss immediately, to taking their time with warm-up questions ('When did you meet each other?', 'What things about him do you most like?'), before broaching the climactic question. The resulting film, *I Love You*, convinced Dohi that film-making should become a regular part of Children Meet Cinema's annual activities.

In 2008, Children Meet Cinema's participating film-maker was the celebrated director Hirokazu Koreeda, director of *Nobody Knows* (2004) and the Palme d'Or-winning *Shoplifters* (2018), and a long-term acquaintance of Dohi's from her time working in the Japanese film industry. Koreeda, who has worked in the mediums of both drama and documentary – set a theme of 'Family' for those wishing

to make fiction films, and of 'Work' for those wishing to make documentaries. Before the workshop, Koreeda sent a letter to the children in the form of a video. In this, he asked them to look around when they were walking around Kanazawa, and, if they found someone who sparked their interest in terms of what their job was, to make a note and bring it to the workshop. The children participating in the subsequent film-making activity split into groups of six. One group, spending a day walking around Kanazawa looking for inspiration, chose to focus upon the owner of a Korean sweet shop, who agreed to let the children film in his shop. Dohi was struck by the way in which the children talked all the way through the footage they shot initially, commenting excitedly upon how tasty the sweets looked, while the camera was running. Watching their initial rushes back with the children, Koreeda remarked that he wanted to see how a particular sweet was made. This idea captured the children's imagination, and they subsequently returned to the shop to ask if they could film in the kitchen. Another team chose to film in a bakery, and Dohi recalls how the group's initial camera-operator, a small boy, was so small in stature that, when filming the manager of the shop, the camera was directed at such an upward angle that only the man's nostrils were visible. Elsewhere, the bread was all placed on relatively high counters around the shop, meaning that, in a documentary about a bakery, there was no visible bread! Again, the children themselves learned from watching their rushes, not only regarding the question of camera height, but also about the importance of using a tripod, given the oft-wandering nature of their small camera-person's framing:

They watched what they had shot, and understood it was too unstable. And this led them to discover that this is what a tripod is for. We didn't teach them, 'If there is a tripod and you use it' ... They worked this out for themselves. 'Oh, with the tripod, it is much better', and they took a tripod the next time they went to film in the bakery. (Conversation with author)

In 2009, Children Meet Cinema's participating film-maker was Kôji Hagiuda, director of the films *Rakuen* (1998), *Going Home* (2004) and *Kodomo no Kodomo* (2008), who proposed a theme of 'Be moved', which participants were able to explore as either documentary or fiction. Dohi describes how, on the first day, Hagiuda asked the children, 'When is your heart moved?' The children responded, saying, 'When I am happy, or when I am very angry or very sad.' Hagiuda prompted the children to be more concrete in explaining exactly *when* their heart felt sad, and this elicited stories possessing a greater degree of detail and granularity, such as one child's experience of becoming lost in a big shop and being unable to find his mother: in this case, an initial feeling of powerful sadness changed to a feeling of relief and calm when he was subsequently reunited with his mother. Hagiuda told the children: 'This scene can be a movie. When your heart is moved, you can make a film.' Dohi remembers how this discussion of feelings led one 11-year-old boy to have his own, unprompted realisation about the nature of filmic genres, realising that: 'Genre is how a film makes the audience's heart moved. Whether the film makes them sad or makes them afraid, that is the genre.'

One particular film – a documentary entitled *The Leaf Moves*, made by a small team of two 6-year-old boys and a 7-year-old girl – was particularly memorable. The film began with a series of interviews, in which the children asked members of the public: 'What moves your heart?' The day on which the film was shot happened to be Earth Day, an annual event celebrated globally, in which members of the public show support for protecting the environment. As such, the children encountered a man dressed as the Earth, his limbs encased in an enormous blue and green globe. Asking the 'Earth', in this respect, what moved his heart, the children were subsequently inspired to ask the same question of the trees, of a passing ant, and – finally, and climactically – of the wind. Here, the children were faced with a challenge, however, as they quickly realised that, despite its tangible properties (in terms of how it could be heard and felt), it was very difficult to capture the wind in visual terms: despite being highly sensate, the wind was effectively invisible. This prompted a series of experiments trying to film the wind, leading the children first to film a tree – a material presence in which, recalling D.W. Griffith's famous observation that 'Cinema is the wind

in the trees', the children were able to see the wind – and, subsequently, to film a piece of paper thrown by one of the boys into the air, which was then filmed as it was caught by the wind to travel high up into the sky, and disappear. Dohi recounts how:

We were very moved by this film. Perhaps they caught this shot [of the paper disappearing into the sky] by coincidence, but overall, it was clear to us that they were filming because their hearts were moved by doing so. With the shot of the ant, it was the same: they filmed because they wanted to film, because the ant was moving. This was a very big experience for me, and for all our staff, and a few of us cried in the cinema when watching the children's work. (Conversation with author)

Dohi considers 2010 to be a significant point of departure in the experience of film-making with Children Meet Cinema, as this was the first year the project worked with celebrated Japanese director Nobuhiro Suwa, who Dohi decided to approach after watching the film *Yuki and Nina* (2009). Suwa has since become a significant presence within the project, in particular leading Children Meet Cinema's annual engagement with CCAJ. Dohi describes how, while Children Meet Cinema was already adopting a significantly non-directive approach to practical film education (through its policy of 'don't teach'), Suwa's involvement served to 'unfix the frame' in certain key respects, to such an extent that Dohi herself considers Children Meet Cinema's film-making workshops in terms of 'before Suwa' and 'after Suwa'. A proponent of improvisation and flexibility of approaches in film-making, Suwa's influence led Children Meet Cinema to change certain key aspects of the way in which film-making with children was approached. The first was not to fix technical roles. Rather than establishing a fixed camera-person, director and so on, Suwa encouraged the rotation of roles, so that each child was able to gain experience of directing, of filming and so on. Suwa's second innovation, subsequently adopted as ongoing practice within the project, was, in particular with regard to fiction, not to use a written script. After Suwa, Children Meet Cinema abandoned the use of written scripts, thus allowing for a greater degree of flexibility of filming, un beholden to the page. Dohi considers these changes to have fostered a significant sense of development in Children Meet Cinema's practice, allowing for both a greater sense of democracy among the young people making each film and – subsequently – a greater sense of shared ownership ('everyone can feel that *this is my film*'). Dohi recalls one example of a group of young people, after Suwa, who still chose to designate one boy as 'the director'. As a result, this boy was made responsible, within the group, for any problem that arose during the production. If their plans were met with difficulties, the boy was told, 'You are the director, you need to make a decision.' It was only at the point at which the boy said 'Please help me, I don't know' that Dohi feels the group began to fully cohere and work as a team to make the film.

Suwa is one of the few film-makers to have led Children Meet Cinema's formal film-making workshops more than once: following his initial year in Kanazawa in 2010 (when the theme was 'If...', each film being led by a sense of imaginative provocation, such as, 'What if your neighbour was a ghost?' or 'What if the world was only children, with no adults?'), Suwa again led workshops in 2014 in Yokohama. Dohi describes these subsequent workshops as simultaneously challenging and inspiring, following a suggestion from Suwa that they try to make films without fixing the story in advance. On the first day, the teams filmed an initial scene, without knowing what had happened either before or after the events, seen in terms of the film's narrative. One group filmed a scene of a break-in, in which a man stole an unseen item, and was subsequently pursued by a policeman. Having shot this scene, the group needed to consider who the man was, what he had stolen, and why he had stolen it. They decided that he had stolen a beautiful necklace for his terminally ill and bed-ridden girlfriend, who had expressed her desire to own a beautiful necklace. This led to a subsequent scene in which the thief had a serious encounter with the policeman, who imparted the moral of the film (eventually titled *Fugitive of Love*) that, 'If you steal something, it is not love.' Dohi considers this style of film-making (reminiscent

of the earlier film-making practice of Chloé Zhao), where one does not know how the film ends, to be particularly suitable for young people:

If you decide the story in advance, you are limited by the shape of the narrative. But if you don't know how the story ends, you can just find the next shot, and then the shot after that. On the third day of the project, the shoot must finish, but the story itself does not need to end. Life goes on, and so does the story. Following this approach, the film became very strong and real. Not childish, but real. (Conversation with author)

The relationship between Children Meet Cinema's approach to film-making with young people and the cinematic aesthetics of realism (as discussed in regard to film education practices elsewhere in the world in Chambers [2022a]) is complex, and seems to vary depending on the film-maker shaping the annual approach to the young people's film-making. In 2012, the film-making workshop was led by Naomi Kawase, director of *The Mourning Forest* (2007), *Still the Water* (2014) and *Sweet Bean* (2015), who – following her experience with both documentary and drama – explored a theme of 'Find the protagonist in town' within a hybrid register, mixing aspects of fiction and documentary. Participating children were tasked with finding someone in Kanazawa who did not consider themselves to be an actor, who would then become the protagonist of a fictional film. Here, aspects of documentary modality – in particular, through the use of non-actors, and through interviews that the children were required to conduct in order to audition candidates – were positioned in direct interface with aspects of dramatic artifice.

When asked to be the project's annual film-making mentor, Kawase told Dohi that, if she were to undertake the workshop, the children would 'lose their smiles'. Dohi considered this to be an acceptable compromise for the benefits to the children of being able to work with Kawase. Ultimately, she found Kawase's prediction to be accurate, when the children did indeed lose their smiles. Within Kawase's relatively serious approach, the children initially struggled, without the same scope for fun and playfulness as there had been within previous iterations of the project. One 7-year-old boy, in particular, finding himself in the group with Kawase as its facilitator, wanted to play a spy in the film. As Dohi describes:

He said to Kawase, 'I want to play a spy.' She asked him, 'Do you know a spy? Have you met any spies?' When he answered no, she said, 'So how can you play a spy, if you don't know about spies?' At the end of the first day, his mother came to pick him up, and he said to his mother: 'I don't want to come again. This workshop is boring.' I was there, and I can understand his feeling. He really wanted to play a spy. I asked Kawase to talk with his mother, and – while I don't know what she said to her – the second day, he came back. (Conversation with author)

Ultimately, Kawase relented and in the group's final film, there is a brief moment (otherwise unexplained or unmotivated within the film) in which two spies – the boy and Kawase herself – cross the frame several times.

A similar dialectic between playfulness and imagination is evident elsewhere in the experiences of film education offered by the project. Children Meet Cinema largely seeks to retain space for younger children's desire to play, and, as such, elementary school children, in particular, are generally allowed to play the roles that they want, no matter how unrealistic, whether this is a detective, a killer or a police officer. However, Dohi describes a moment during the film-making workshops that Suwa led at the 2017 Tokyo International Film Festival, in which he challenged the work of several groups of junior high-school students (age 12–15), who had all made films portraying themselves as detectives. Suwa struggled with the lack of on-screen believability, a difficulty with the film's *mise en scène* which he sought to highlight to the young learners. As Dohi describes: 'It is very clear that there are no junior high-school detectives. It is not believable. We can understand that this is a 12-year-old boy who is *playing* a detective, but we do not believe.' Suwa wished to illustrate this to the children without words, by drawing their attention to the *mise en scène* embodied within their film work. Watching their filming back together on the big

screen, Suwa asked the children, 'Do you believe this person is a detective?', and the children responded that they did not.

This became another of Suwa's suggestions with which Children Meet Cinema continued in subsequent years. While primary school students were allowed to continue to retain aspects of play in terms of the acting roles they assumed within their own films, older participants (whether at junior high school or, latterly, at lycée high school [15–18 years old]) are asked to consider *believability* as a core aspect of the *mise en scène* of the films they are making. In a later edition of Children Meet Cinema's film-making workshops, a theme that explicitly suited the cultivation of this sense of believability in cinema was 'Suitable for us'. Here, children were asked to choose a person sitting next to them that they did not know, and to write a film idea based on that person, motivated by what they felt seemed 'suitable for them'. As Dohi describes, the ideas that the children subsequently came up with, while not necessarily accurate in their estimations of the person serving as their imaginative prompt, were still tempered by the actors available to play the characters:

A film that is suitable for us means you cannot be a detective. A very strange or fantastical person, yes. But an old man, or something like this, is difficult to imagine. Another version of this we have done with Children Meet Cinema is 'Find the place' for your film. This means the children need to find places to film, which need to be their neighbours' gardens, or similar, rather than the American desert! (Conversation with author)

Here, we return to Pasolini's discussion of the cinematic real (Stack, 2018). As I have discussed elsewhere (Chambers, 2022b), encouraging children to become aware of the expressive properties of the people and places around them would seem in itself inseparable from cultivating an appreciation for the irreducible qualities of the image. In these terms, the *believable* within cinema remains a complex interface between aesthetics, a pragmatic approach to resources (using what we have), and efforts to empower young people by quietening the onlooking self in order to tune in to the singularities of experience and identity.

Conclusion

Considering the series of encounters between young children and some of Japan's leading film-makers discussed above, it would seem fitting to consider Children Meet Cinema as an 'experimental pedagogy' (Chambers, 2020) – or, indeed, as a series of experimental pedagogies – of similar scope and ambition to that inherent within France's CCAJ. Starting in 2004 (nine years after CCAJ in 1995, and one year prior to Cinema en curs in 2005 [Chambers, 2021]), Children Meet Cinema is also likely to be, at the time of writing, one of the world's longest running film education projects. Like CCAJ, Children Meet Cinema seems to prioritise a bold exploratory focus on the open, unsystematised possibilities of cinema, in modulating its approach to practical film-making workshops year on year, while, elsewhere, consolidating aspects of best practice in order to share 'what has worked' with young people across the country. (This lack of consolidation of best practice is something which has been criticised about CCAJ.)

Where Children Meet Cinema distinguishes itself from CCAJ, however, is through its remarkable interface with Japan's living, changing film culture – a relationship that seems relatively unparalleled elsewhere in the history of film education. While Cinema en curs has discussed 'the bond with auteurs' (Aidelman and Colell, 2018: 156) that its programmes of film education seek to establish with young learners (including, at times, direct involvement from film-makers such as Carla Simón), the very literal bond between young people and auteur film-makers enacted annually within Children Meet Cinema is a striking example of film education in direct conversation with the living practice of film-making. Within Children Meet Cinema, film education pedagogy is, to a significant extent, shaped by film-makers at the forefront of national conversations about what film is, has been and could be. In these terms, the tendency for film education provision in the UK, in particular, to retain such a siloed degree of distance from aspects of independent film culture is cast into somewhat stark relief.

Similarly, one of Children Meet Cinema's most provocative proposals for film education programmes elsewhere in the world to consider remains Dohi's insistence upon the non-directional approach of 'don't teach'. While aspects of less legible co-creative interaction (Chambers, 2019) between adult facilitators and young children no doubt remain within the manner in which certain questions are asked and suggestions are made, the corrective placed by Children Meet Cinema on letting children discover things for themselves within an area of creative practice in which, as Dohi rightly identifies, 'there are no right answers' is a source of considerable provocation and inspiration. So, too, are the gentle methods that Children Meet Cinema's practical film-making workshops have developed in order to establish crucial points of perspective from which certain aspects of the film-making process are thrown into relief for young learners, such as the project's later decision to integrate aspects of editing throughout the film shoot, or – more simply – establishing a regular rhythm between filming and rewatching material recently filmed in order that children can understand the complex interplay between the two.

Whether or not Children Meet Cinema is able to achieve its aim not only to introduce young learners to the irreducibility of the cinematic image, but also simultaneously to cultivate greater levels of self-esteem – in convincing children of their own irreplaceability through their encounters within cinema – is outside the scope of this article. What remains abundantly clear, however, is that the project's degree of commitment both to cinema and to the agency of young learners encountering aspects of it for the first time, and the significant degree of imagination and insight with which such encounters are approached, are a considerable source of inspiration worthy of further research and exploration for film educators elsewhere in the world.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the University of Edinburgh's research ethics standards.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author is Editor-in-Chief for this journal. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

- Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (FR 1896, Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière)
- Cien niños esperando un tren* (*One Hundred Children Waiting for a Train*) (CL/GB 1988, Ignacio Agüero)
- Going Home* (JP 2004, Kôji Hagiuda)
- Good Morning* (JP 1959, Yasujirô Ozu)
- Hedgehog in the Fog* (SU 1975, Yuri Norstein)
- Kodomo no Kodomo* (JP 2008, Kôji Hagiuda)
- The Mourning Forest* (JP 2007, Naomi Kawase)
- Nobody Knows* (JP 2004, Hirokazu Koreeda)
- Rakuen* (JP 1998, Kôji Hagiuda)
- The Red Balloon* (FR 1956, Albert Lamorisse)
- Shoplifters* (JP 2018, Hirokazu Koreeda)

Still the Water (JP 2014, Naomi Kawase)
Sweet Bean (JP 2015, Naomi Kawase)
Yuki and Nina (FR/JP 2009, Nobuhiro Suwa)

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