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SCENE-BY-SCENE SYNOPSIS FOR A MAN VANISHES

A MAN VANISHES (NINGEN JOHATSU), Directed by Shohei Imamura, 1967.
An Imamura Productions/Nihon Eiga Shinsha/ATG film. Black and white, 130 min.
Photography: Kenji Ishiguro; Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi.
With Yoshie Hayakawa, Shigeru Tsuyuguchi, Sayo Hayakawa, Shohei Imamura.

We see the police's missing person files. An officer describes the case of Tadashi Oshima, a salesman for a plastics firm who disappeared in April a year and a half previously, leaving no traces.

Tsuyuguchi (an actor, billed in the film as "Yoshie Hayakawa's assistant," and Yoshie (Oshima's fiancée, nicknamed "Nezumi" or "mouse," are seen interviewing the president of Oshima's company, Oka Industries. They discuss Oshima's salary and possible motives. The president describes him as "quiet." They also speak with the president's wife and her father, who knew Oshima.

Oshima's older sister serves Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie tea.

Tsuyuguchi asks Sayo Hayakawa, Yoshie's older sister, how she feels about Yoshie's making a movie about her search. Sayo replies, "If it helps her find him, I'm glad."

Yoshie describes (voiceovers) how she quit her job at a hospital because she was tired of being asked about Oshima. We see her walking by the sea, and in voiceovers she is asked if she still loves Oshima. She says yes.

OPENING TITLES

At a Buddhist prayer meeting attended by Oshima's father and other relatives, a shamaness medium tries to conjure up his spirit.

Oshima's family, including his mother (wearing babushka) discuss their bewilderment, their continuing faith in God, and their sympathy for poor Yoshie.

Another associate of Oshima's is interviewed.

Oshima's oldest brother is interviewed by the sea. He tells of how he ran away for six months when he was 18.

Yoshie interviews another of Oshima's brothers.

Oshima's father (in snow) describes how his father deserted his mother.

Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie discuss Oshima's early life as we see snapshots and film clips of Oshima.

A typical morning at Oshima's company. The foreman gives a pep talk to the assembled workers.

Some of the workers have a small party

Film clips of Oshima from a company PR film--we see him eating rice and standing with a pencil behind his ear.

A series of interviews with his co-workers who lived with him in the company dorm. They describe him as an indifferent worker who drank too much and carried on with women.

One of his former girlfriends is spoken to (she is kneeling on her veranda). She describes Oshima as a "nice, gentle" person.

The girlfriend's sister (eyes blacked out) says that Oshima got her pregnant and wouldn't marry her.

A bar madam describes him as a girl-chaser.

A female co-worker describes how Oshima tricked another of his lovers (referred to as Kimi-chan).

We see a photo of Kimi-chan (eyes blacked out).

Yoshie talks with a man (on the street, then in a bar) who worked with Kimi-chan, and speaks of how she was mistreated by Oshima.

Two women describe the fight between Oshima and Kimi-chan.

Several more workers give their opinions.

Finally, we see Yoshie's interview with Kimi-chan (shot through the roof with Kimi-chan's eyes blacked out). Kimi-chan says, "I love him. I wanted to marry him. I can't explain it to you but I'll write it down." Yoshie grows hard, insisting, "I want to know just how he broke it off." Yoshie later says, "I hear you were pregnant." Kimi-chan denies it. "Why would people say such a thing if it weren't true?" says Yoshie. Yoshie asks Kimi-chan, "Why do you think I'm searching for him like this?" Kimi-chan replies, "Because you want to marry him. As for me, I only care if he's happy in his new life."

Shot of Yoshie walking. We hear her wonder if Oshima can really build a new life. "If he doesn't want me, I want him to be a man and tell me so," she says. "Maybe he wasn't so charming after all."

We see Imamura (heavy, wearing glasses) and his staff discussing the facts they've gathered, trying to plot Oshima's route on a blackboard. They consider the possibility that Kimi-chan is harboring Oshima.

They travel to Fukushima to follow the trail of Oshima's flight in mid-April. Interviews with the boss and some of the workers in a glass company he worked for briefly, with people in the bar where he drank, and with some of the stores he visited on his sales rounds.

The camera pans down the ledger of Oshima's sales rounds in Fukushima through April 17, the day on which he disappeared from that area.

Tsuyuguchi and Yoshi walk down the street of the town (Wakamatsu) where he disappeared. They interview the family shop which was the last place he was known to have gone on his business rounds. The workers there say he left that day in a taxi, while he'd always walked before. Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie go to the taxi company, but the driver/owner has trouble remembering ("Two years is a long time!") They take him back to the area of Oshima's disappearance, and he remembers that Oshima left the cab to go to a bar. No one in the bar can remember him.

Once again the staff gathers around a table with Imamura to discuss possible motives for Oshima's disappearance. There are no real clues.

Continuing to follow Oshima's trail through April, some whole days are blanks.

Yoshie in Oshima's room at the company dorm, tells how he returned there briefly on April 26, but why?

A drowned corpse is found which slightly resembles Oshima. The circumstances of the corpse's discovery are related by a police officer, but positive identification cannot be made.

An old chum of Oshima's who saw him on April 3, says Oshima complained he didn't want to get married (to Yoshie).

A bar madam says he was overheard saying something about "two sisters."

Yoshie gets her hair done in Kofu, and then goes to see another friend of Oshima's, who recalls telling him, "Your fiancée is your fiancée, and her sister is just her sister."

We see Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie driving, listening to tapes of these disturbing new mentions of Yoshie's sister.

Yoshie's sister Sayo is seated with Yoshie at a table. Sayo quietly denies that she had anything to do with Oshima, that she ever gave him money or met with him. Yoshie, becoming emotional, accuses Sayo of always being cold to her. "You never offer me a drink," she says. "You never asked for one," replies Sayo. Yoshie starts to cry.

After this meeting, Yoshie is distraught. She tells Tsuyuguchi, "She's filthy, you're filthy, go home." She speaks of her hate for Sayo.

The film begins examining the relationship between the two sisters. We see snapshots of Yoshie and Sayo as children, while their half-brother tells how, "Yoshie used to bite on her nails until they bled."

A relative shows Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie (all dressed up) a book about the Hayakawa family like written by Yoshie's father (seen in snapshot with sword). The family goes back many generations. The relative says that Yoshie gets her stubbornness from her father. Yoshie (in voiceover) replies that "Sayo used to tell me I was a good-for-nothing weakling, like mother."

SYNOPSIS/4

Various relatives talk about the bitterness and rivalry between the two sisters that has existed since childhood.

A geisha (eyes blacked out) tells how Sayo was forced into geishahood at a young age, and we see photos of her as an apprentice.

Sayo's old benefactor (she is a ni-go, or "professional mistress") talks about how he decided she should take driving lessons and get her license.

Imamura and Yoshie appear on a TV talk show. Yoshie says she wants to find Oshima "so I can return him to his parents."

We see a pile of newspaper clippings showing that the filming of this manhunt is attracting a fair amount of attention.

Yoshie meets the press (shot from behind Yoshie, briefly).

In a car en route to the apartment the two sisters shared at the time of Oshima's disappearance, Tsuyuguchi tells Yoshie "You've gotten real good at this." Imamura explains how this is becoming a fiction, how Yoshie's feelings towards Kimi-chan and Sayo have been affected by the filming process.

They interview the apartment landlady (eyes blacked out).

Imamura and Tsuyuguchi sit in front of a poster of Oshima and discuss their predicament. They agree that Yoshie is not really interested in finding Oshima any more, that she is in fact infatuated with Tsuyuguchi. Imamura decides to "make use" of this new development.

A hidden camera films Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie in a restaurant. She says, "Over the past six months he (Oshima) has seemed to grow far away. I never thought I'd forget him, but..."

Tsuyuguchi and Yoshie by the seashore. "Right now there is no one I like more than you. I don't want to be parted from you," she says.

A medium tries to conjure Oshima's spirit. "I won't come home!" she says. "Are you dead?" asks Yoshie. "Don't ask me!" she replies.

Yoshie stands in front of a screen and recounts a strange dream she had about cats getting nails driven through their heads.

The proprietor of a beauty parlor near Sayo and Yoshie's apartment (in the Asakusa area of Tokyo) speaks of Sayo. A worker in their building is interviewed also.

A merchant in their neighborhood speaks of seeing Sayo and Oshima together several times. He is positive it was Sayo he saw, not Yoshie. "I don't know what they were saying, but they seemed like brother and sister."

Another medium, visited by Yoshie and Imamura, exclaims (as Oshima), "I was poisoned to death!" She goes on to say that he was "closer to the older sister," and when Yoshie asks, "Where are you?", she replies, "You know that, or at least your sister does!"

A brief shot of a rotted corpse.

For their climactic confrontation, Imamura brought Sayo and Yoshie together on a carefully constructed teahouse set, on which they knew they were being filmed, but which was designed to make them feel "at ease." The scene begins with Sayo denying that she ever called Oshima at work.

We cut to a scene of the receptionist at Oshima's company identifying Sayo's voice on tape as the woman who used to call for Oshima "all the time" and even identified herself as "Hayakawa."

Cut back to Sayo saying, "I never called. Never!" Yoshie asks if Oshima ever visited Sayo while Yoshie was at work. Sayo denies it. They listen to a tape recording of evidence given by someone who saw them. Sayo says, "I have no recollection of anything like that." Yoshie presses her. "I didn't want to doubt you, but what else can I do?" she says. Both sisters cry.

Imamura brings in the merchant who swears he saw Sayo and Oshima together. Sayo grills him, "What was I wearing?" "I never forget a customer's face," he counters. Both insist they are not lying, and have no reason to lie. They reach an impasse. "You all think I am lying, but this is very strange to me," says Sayo.

Yoshie turns to Imamura. "What is truth?" she asks him desperately. "I don't know," he replies. He then claps his hands and cries, "Set!" and the tearoom set surrounding them begins to disappear. "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." By the time Imamura is finished, the sisters are seated on a few tatami mats stranded in the middle of a huge sound stage.

In the street, outside the apartment where the sisters lived, 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 together and announces, "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 the building, cameras, microphones, and clapboards are all clearly visible. Sayo continues to dispute the witnesses, as the camera repeatedly pulls back to view the "scene" being played in the street. After much argument, everyone waves good-bye and leaves, and we hear Yoshie saying, "I can't believe anything. That's the toughest thing--not being able to believe anything. I wish she weren't my sister." The frame freezes as Yoshie says, "I guess this is the end." Tsuyuguchi says, "Yes, we're out of time. The film is over, but not your life. What will you do tomorrow?" She replies, "I don't know."

--ALAN POUL