

VAPOUR



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Stefano Coccia — 10 March 2026 *Festival, Bergamo Film Meeting 2026* by Anush Hamzehian, Vittorio Mortarotti

Rating: 7.5

Directed by Italian filmmakers Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti, *Vapour* is a captivating documentary that explores the Japanese phenomenon of the *Jōhatsu*, or the "evaporated people." These are individuals who deliberately vanish from their established lives, creating new identities and severing all ties with family, friends, and colleagues. The film was presented in the Close-up Views section of the 2026 Bergamo Film Meeting.

A Magnifying Glass on the *Jōhatsu* Phenomenon

On our first day in Bergamo, we immersed ourselves in the festival's documentary section, Close-up Views. We took a "close-up" approach ourselves, viewing two films in quick succession at the Sala dell'Orologio. The first was Martin Kollar's *Chronicle (Letopis, 2025)*, a disorienting visual poem. In it, Slovakian winter landscapes and alienating glimpses of the Anthropocene combine to create a restless snapshot of humanity, caught at a crossroads between an inscrutable present and precarious futures.

The French-produced documentary *Vapour (Vapeur, 2025)* had an equally strong impact on us. Made in Japan by Italian filmmakers Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti, the film explores a subject with which they are intimately familiar: the nation's complex social realities.

This time, their focus is on the phenomenon of *Jōhatsu*, or "evaporation," where thousands of

Japanese people deliberately vanish from the lives of their families, friends, and colleagues. Seeking to build new, untraceable identities elsewhere—often in smaller communities where it's easier to go "off the radar"—a variety of stressors and motivations drive these individuals.

While this radical choice might seem frightening or alienating to a Western observer, it is not always perceived that way in Japan. For many, voluntary disappearance represents a less brutal alternative to suicide. In fact, as the filmmakers noted, some of their Japanese contacts were equally amazed that Italians rarely consider such a "Plan B."

Cultural Differences



(An image of Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti, directors of the documentary *Vapour*)

Though approached from a unique cinematic angle, *Vapour* aligns with a contemporary trend in cinema that explores the less familiar aspects of Japanese culture. A comparable, albeit very different, example of this tendency is Hikari (a.k.a. Mitsuyo Miyazaki)'s bittersweet comedy, *Rental Family*, which also examines Japanese cultural phenomena and features an extraordinary performance by Brendan Fraser.

This is not the first time the long-standing phenomenon of the *Jōhatsu*, or "evaporated people," has been brought to the big screen. During a Q&A in Bergamo, the directors discussed their rediscovery of Shōhei Imamura's eccentric and disorienting 1967 documentary, *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen jōhatsu*). A Master of Japanese cinema, Imamura crafted a film that calls into question the line between reality and fiction. It portrays an ordinary man who, like many Japanese people at the time, decides to disappear without a trace, leaving his girlfriend and his job behind.

A Singular Investigation on a Japanese Island



(Vapour, an image from the documentary by Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti)

While on a promotional tour in Japan for their previous work, *Yonaguni* (2021), filmmakers Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti sought a guide for their next delicate project. Their search led them to Goro, a middle-aged detective who seemed lifted from the pages of a Maigret adventure. Goro specialized in helping relatives find information on the *Jōhatsu*—people who had vanished into thin air. He agreed to inform the filmmakers when a particularly compelling case arose.

The documentary, with its geometric precision and atmospheric fidelity, follows Goro to the volcanic island of Sakurajima. He is searching for the last traces of a man who chose to "evaporate," leaving his daughter without a word for some time. However, this man's fate soon reveals itself to be a classic MacGuffin, as the narrative's focus gradually shifts. Our attention is drawn instead to the investigator himself, his encounters with the local community, and the deep-seated roots of the *Jōhatsu* phenomenon. Among the locals, three women of different ages—Toshie, Mayumi, and Moe—stand out, their combined presence echoing the chorus of a Greek tragedy. Ultimately, the story broadens to contemplate the volcano's silent, ever-present threat, which geologists warn could reawaken with disastrous consequences.

On a remote, rarely visited island, echoes of Herzog's documentary style blend with the atmosphere of a 1960s Antonioni film, particularly *L'Avventura*. Though the narrative sometimes pauses, tackling perhaps too many subjects, these moments give way to increasingly intimate and introspective reflections. This theme is skillfully captured in the unexpected parable of Detective Goro and crystallised in a splendid final shot.

Film Details

Original title: Vapeur

Director: Anush Hamzehian, Vittorio Mortarotti

Country/Year: France / 2025

Running time: 73'

Genre: Documentary