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The Japanese Cinema

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## The Japanese Cinema

The movies came early to Japan. A little more than twenty years after the West had finally forced open the long-closed doors of their country, the Japanese were enjoying the peep-show kinoscope. By 1897, the films of the brothers Lumière were unreeling before admiring and impressed audiences, and a year later the Japanese were making their own movies. In Japan, motion pictures were both popular and considered respectable family entertainment. The Crown Prince himself, later the Emperor Taisho, attended the first Vitascopes showing.

This respectability, however, proved a mixed blessing. While in some countries—America, for example—the infant cinema was thought to be disreputable and was consequently allowed to discover its own way of telling a story, in Japan the movies were early forced to adopt the conventions of the drama or the novel. It was not until about 1920 that the cinema could begin to become itself, creating comedies and melodramas that were movie-like, and began to assume the characteristics that we now associate with Japanese cinema.

In the Japanese film, three separate tendencies early become apparent: a continuing debt to literary beginnings, extending to the casting of stage actors and theatrical troupes; an attitude toward the past in which history is seen as contemporary; and a fidelity to things as they are, which has allowed the Japanese cinema to interest itself in those aspects of life notoriously disregarded or glossed over in the films of some other countries.

One of the characteristics of Japanese life is a preoccupation with the past. What another country might consider dead tradition is, for the Japanese,

still much alive. The Japanese film reflected this awareness of the past and early elevated the historical film (the *jidai-geki*) into an important genre of its own. Such directors as Hiroshi Inagaki, Teinosuke Kinugasa, Daisuke Ito, and Sadao Yamanaka helped make the period film one of the most important genres of Japanese cinema. It was important precisely because history was regarded as alive, and the events of the past were shown as though they were contemporary.

At the same time, other types of film that are now recognized as peculiarly Japanese were evolving. Important among these were the *shomin-geki*, films about Japanese lower-middle-class life. These, like the period films, were directed with a realism and fidelity rare in the cinema of other countries at this time. From these pictures there emerges an attitude toward life that is typically Japanese. It is seen at its best in the films of Yasujiro Ozu and in Heinosuke Gosho's best *shomin-geki* comedy *Madamu to Nyobo* (*The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*) which, coincidentally, is also Japan's first talkie.

Besides these *shomin-geki* films, an interest in the lower classes and the peasantry (sections of society usually romanticized elsewhere) manifested itself in such a realistic film as *Tsuchi* (*Earth*). There are, to be sure, a number of Japanese pictures that portray life as they would have it rather than as it is; still, picture for picture, the Japanese film exhibits an awareness of reality that one does not associate with world cinema of the thirties and forties.

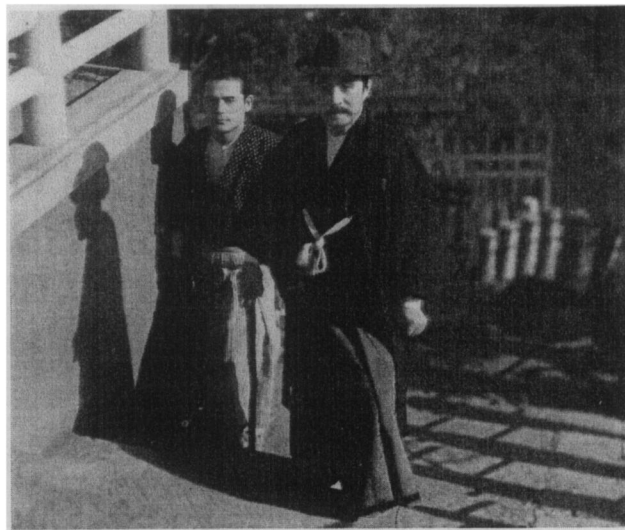
Because of Japanese acceptance of the world as it is, the industry does not make very good propaganda pictures. It took Japanese film a long time to learn the falsification that propaganda demands. Early war films, such as *Gonin no Sekkohei* (*Five Scouts*), are not propaganda but unsentimental recountings of

*Tsuchi* (*Earth*). 1939. Directed by Tomu Uchida





*Utamaro o Meguru no Gonin Onna (Utamaro and His Five Women)*. 1946. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi



*Sugata Sanshiro (Sanshiro Sugata)*. 1943. Directed by Akira Kurosawa



*Nigorie (Muddy Waters)*. 1953. Directed by Tadashi Imai

what life is like at the front. Though there were a number of films that the wartime government judged more successful as propaganda, even in these the dishonesty was not in the depiction of the enemy as overly rapacious but, for example, in its indication that the occupation of a country was really for the benefit of its natives, or that such an exercise as Pearl Harbor was merely a job to be done. As the war progressed,



*Tokyo Monogatari (Tokyo Story)*. 1953. Directed by Yasujiro Ozu

however, the problem of satisfying both the demands of the government and their own awareness of reality became too difficult for most directors. The older—among them Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Sadao Yamanaka—retreated into the past or made films about the home front. The new directors, such as Akira Kurosawa and Keisuke Kinoshita, attempted fresh approaches to the past or cultivated new attitudes to the war itself. Japan's growing cinematic regard for reality as the Japanese understand it was somewhat imperiled but by no means extinguished.

When Japan unwillingly opened its doors in the 1860s, it was inundated by a flood of Western accoutrements—railroad trains, the telegraph, eventually electric lights and the telephone—which soon revolutionized the look of the country. After the defeat of 1945, the country was again deluged, this time by a full-scale occupation and all sorts of ideas new to a society that had managed to remain feudal. Such American ideas as democracy, equal rights for women, the notion of the individual as an ideal, were all novel to the large majority of the Japanese. They were, however, embraced—just as the religion, art, and manners of the T'ang court had been embraced a little over a millennium earlier. Postwar films soon reflected these changes in Japanese life. The pictures of Kurosawa would probably have been about individuals anyway, but now they were about individuals learning the responsibilities of individuality. Mizoguchi, long interested in the Japanese woman, now saw in her a symbol of the newly liberated person. The more traditional directors—Ozu, for example, or Mikio Naruse—continued their interest in social units such as the couple and the family, but this was now interpreted by a new audience, interested (as, indeed, these directors had always been) in the members of the unit rather than merely in the unit itself.

The war and defeat had left Japan poor. The Japanese film, like the Italian, made this circumstance into a cinematic virtue by portraying the poverty which in Italy earned the name "neo-realism" but which in Japan went unremarked. Among the reasons for this was the existence of several traditions that led to the same kind of honesty for which the postwar Italian film was rightly famed. One was an aesthetic—manifested in things as apparently dissimilar as the





*Nogiku no Gotoki Kimi Nariki (She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum)*. 1955. Directed by Keisuke Kinoshita



*Yoru no Tsuzumi (Night Drum)*. 1958. Directed by Tadashi Imai

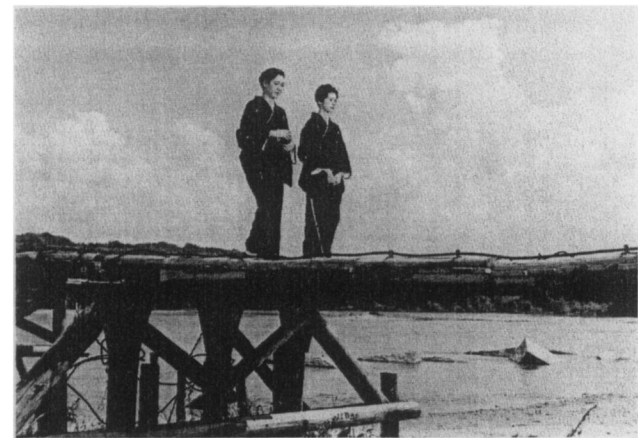
Japanese house, Zen philosophy, judo, and ink-painting—that insisted upon the sober, the economical, the severe. Another was that within the Japanese film (an art as rigidly categorized as other Japanese arts) the *shomin-geki* had long existed as a genre that had shown poverty as a part of life. This postwar period produced some of the finest, such as Ozu's *Tokyo Monogatari (Tokyo Story)* and Goshu's *Osaka no Yado (An Inn in Osaka)*. Other directors as well—Tadashi Imai and Kinoshita among them—brought to their pictures a sense of the very qualities of Japanese life during this most interesting period: poverty, pride, good will, and durability.

One way of defining the Japanese film might be that if the American film is strongest in action, and if the European is strongest in character, then the Japanese film is richest in mood or atmosphere, in presenting people in their own context, characters in their own surroundings. Man and his surroundings—this is the continual theme of the Japanese film, and the Japanese himself regards his surroundings as extensions of himself. On film this creates the palpable atmosphere associated with the Japanese cinema. But such surroundings are temporal as well as spatial, and one of the results is the importance of the *jidai-geki*, that genre which reveals the peculiar and rewarding attitude of the Japanese people toward their past. This, indeed, is to be expected in a country at ease both with surrounding nature and human nature itself, more concerned with the actuality of being than with the promise of becoming. The historical films of Mizoguchi, of Kurosawa, and of Kinoshita are examples of an attitude that predicates the present securely upon the past. A decade after the war that period, too, had become history, and directors such as Naruse and Kon Ichikawa showed its role in creating the present. At the same time, others—Ozu and Shiro Toyoda among them—were showing how postwar attitudes, both good and bad, were likewise created by a continued and living past.

The respect of the Japanese for reality does not, however, imply complacency about society, nor does their reverence toward history indicate an unquestioning acceptance of ideas or institutions inherited



*Enjo (Conflagration)*. 1958. Directed by Kon Ichikawa



*Kohaiyagawake no Aki (The End of Summer)*. 1961. Directed by Yasujiro Ozu

from the past. There has always been a lively element of social criticism in Japanese cinema and an attitude of, at the least, ambivalence toward such elements of the past as feudalism, for example. The war and Japan's first military defeat led many artists—directors certainly included—to scrutinize Japanese society, past and present, and to criticize both its lacks and its excesses. Mizoguchi's last film, *Akasen Chitai (Red-Light District)*, was an attack upon legalized prostitution that hastened the end of that institution. Kurosawa's views of the past have long questioned the validity of *bushi-do*, or "the way of the warrior."

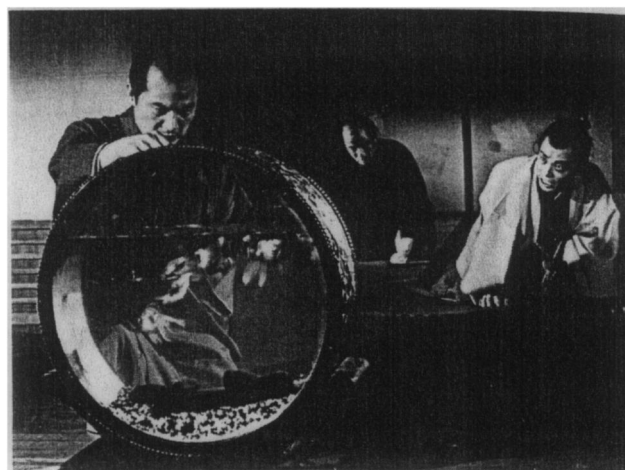
Imai's attitude amounts to a downright condemnation of Japan's completely feudal past and partially feudal present. Since the Japanese more than most men regard their surroundings as an extension of themselves, they retain a full right to do something about them, and about themselves.

The Japanese film industry, whose pictures were among the last to attain an individual flavor, remains the last to retain this individuality. Not only does it make more films a year than almost any other national film industry, but it is the only movie industry totally supported by the home audience. This goes far toward explaining the Japaneseness of the Japanese film, which—for better or worse—continues to be an intelligible expression of the people. The Japanese movie continues to show, for all who care to see, the most perfect reflection of a people in the history of world cinema. Seventy years after its first films—scenes from the Kabuki, adaptations from Tolstoy—the Japanese film has manifestly changed; yet to a degree not found in other countries, cinema in Japan has also remained true to those tendencies one remarks in its early history. Some degree of reliance on literary sources still continues, but in the films of a director such as Ichikawa, the postwar interest in the individual and his problems is clearly reflected. There have been correspondingly fewer period films, but those of Kinoshita and Masaki Kobayashi have continued the vein of social criticism that by now has become part of the Japanese historical perspective. In general, indeed, the past decade has seen a remarkable continuation and increase of the social criticism film, which, although always present, came to greater prominence directly after the war. This can be seen most clearly in the work of directors such as Hiromichi Horikawa, Kaneto Shindo, Tadashi Imai, Tomu Uchida, and Yasuzo Masumura, and in the work of such younger directors as Hiroshi Teshigahara, Nagisa Oshima, Susumu Hani, Masahiro Shinoda, and Shohei Imamura.

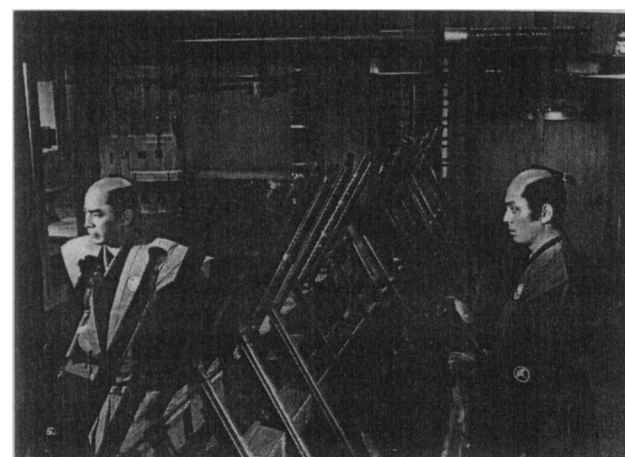
Conversely, those films that showed Japan as it is, without further comment than a meticulously realistic rendering, became fewer during this decade. With rising affluence the *shomin* no longer exists, and hence there is no more *shomin-geki*. With the death of Ozu in 1963, and with his last great film *Samma no Aji* (*An Autumn Afternoon*), the quiet realism that pleads no cause came to an end in Japanese cinema. Continuing, however, in the work of the newer directors is the same concern with things as they are that animated their predecessors. Atmosphere—the feel of a place, of a time, far beyond the limits of the motion picture screen—remains the salient quality of the Japanese film. Seven decades of cinema attest this meticulous devotion to the world as it appears, the world as it is; and this, perhaps, is the main attribute of cinema itself.

—Donald Richie  
Visiting Curator, Department of Film

*The Japanese Cinema*. Directed by Donald Richie. Through July 22. Auditorium



*Ansatsu (Assassination)*. 1964. Directed by Masahiro Shinoda



*Joiuchi (Rebellion)*. 1967. Directed by Masaki Kobayashi



*Akanegumo (Sunset Clouds)*. 1967. Directed by Masahiro Shinoda