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McDonald/Reading a Japanese Film

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Introduction

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 characters in their own surroundings.¹

DONALD RICHIE offered this engaging observation in his seminal work of 1971, *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character*. Scholars and critics in the West have been teasing out its implications ever since, not least by laboring to explain how national character can be seen “as the particular through which the humanistic ideals of universal significance are said to be represented concretely.”²

National character could be a natural point of entry for any approach to Japanese culture. Japan has always intrigued the West and rewarded curiosity at every level of interest, from the least to the most committed. Japanese cinema is uniquely well qualified to bridge the oftentimes puzzling divide between East and West. The visual allure is there, however strange and at times mystifying it may seem to outside eyes.

Since this is a book for every kind of viewer, it needs to apprise the novice, and possibly remind old hands, of a fascinating fact of Japanese cinema: that some knowledge of its history is essential to understanding its characteristics, achievements, and place in the culture of Japan.³ Readers confident of the basics may choose to bypass the following, necessarily brief, historical overview.

A Brief History of Japanese Cinema

New Art, Old Format: 1897–1920

The first successful Japanese film viewed with the *cinématographe* showed famous Tokyo sights such as the scenic bridge Nihonbashi in late 1897. The

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first-ever commercial film in 1898 reeled off seventy feet of center shots of three geisha dancing. Cinema's gaze remained fixed on the stage for the next ten years. Theatrical traditions in Japan were so strong that the new art could not at first imagine dramatic conventions as its own. This burden of tradition retarded the formation of a specifically cinematic grammar, even as the continuity between old art forms and new did in some respects help film gain its artistic independence.

Three definitive characteristics of Japanese cinema are its use of *onnagata* (female impersonators), *benshi* (commentators), and center-front long shots following strict continuity.⁴ Female impersonators continued a unique kabuki tradition from the early Edo period when, in 1629, the Tokugawa shogunate banned women from every kind of theatrical performance. The *benshi* commentators continued an age-old tradition of storytelling manifest in many forms of performance art: bunraku puppet theater, kabuki choral commentary, and specific narrative forms such as *kōdan* historical and *rakugo* comic tales.⁵

The center-front long shot was a natural outcome of cinema's first view of itself as a camera-eye spectator of ongoing stage performance. Most early footage showed what theater audiences saw: entire scenes shot in one long take showing actors full-length. This fixed approach to camera work remained a defining characteristic of Japanese cinema even after the long shot and long take were joined by other more specifically cinematic devices.

The mood Donald Richie sees as definitive refers to effects of atmosphere achieved by aligning characters against a setting viewed in long shot. A telling example in the era of silent film comes in Minoru Murata's *Souls on the Road* (*Rojō no reikon*, 1921). Two prisoners just released trudge wearily down a country road. The cloudy sky and the desolate fields speak for their sense of being helpless and hopeless in an unkind world.

Cinema's theatrical dependency also led to a clear division of repertoire originating in the *kyūgeki* (old drama) of kabuki and the *shimpa* (New School) reaction to it. *Shimpa* used modern settings for a wide range of plays, comedy and suspense and its mainstay, melodrama, tear-jerkers most often derived from novels of unrequited love in domestic settings. Cinema's genre division fell along similar lines. Films dealing with matters previous to 1868 were *jidaigeki* (period drama), those afterward were *gendaijeki* (contemporary/modern drama). Every student of anything Japanese must know 1868 as the watershed date of the Meiji restoration, which brought Japan into modern world.

Cinema's destiny as mass-market art was decided early on. Nikkatsu

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Company's takeover of four competitors in 1912 created a monopoly whose creative drive went in two directions at once. The company's old studio in Kyoto continued to concentrate on its "old drama" specialty, making cinema history with brilliant collaborations such as that between director Shozō Makino (1878–1928) and superstar Matsunosuke Onoe (1892–1923). A new Tokyo studio dedicated to modern variations on *shimpa* melodrama made that *gendai-geki* specialty a market leader. Staple sentimental favorites, such as Tadashi Oguchi's *The Cuckoo* (Hototogisu, 1918), gave a good cry for the money. Separated by war from a loving husband, its heroine of *The Cuckoo* (familiar from a popular novel) suffers melodramatic torment at the hands of her mother-in-law.

Cinema's rapid evolution embraced changes demanded by the *shingeki* (New Theater) movement. A movement for artistic cinema in 1916 called for these technical innovations: subtitles were to replace the *benshi* commentators; Western music would replace the traditional Japanese; acting would be more realistic; and female impersonators would give way to their natural competition. Among the first to film accordingly was Norimasa Kaeriyama (1893–1964), who in 1919 persuaded Nikkatsu to let him direct *The Glory of Life* (*Sei no kagayaki*). Until then he was known as a film connoisseur and author of the seminal book *The Creation of Photography of the Moving Picture Drama* (*Katsudō shanshingeki no seisaku satueihō*).⁶

Tradition's stranglehold was not to be broken quite so easily, thanks to well-entrenched special interest groups such as the *benshi* commentators and *onnagata* female impersonators. Still, the pressure for more realistic effects was there, so while Nikkatsu temporized, a bold new competitor moved quickly in the right direction.

Old Conventions Swept Away: The 1920s

The Shōchiku Company was founded in 1920 by a gigantic syndicate with extensive holdings in theaters and acting troupes. The same year, the Shōchiku Kine School of Art was established with Kaoru Osanai (1881–1928), a leader in the *shingeki* movement, as its head.⁷ Film directors under his supervision were youths about twenty years old, such as Minoru Murata (1897–1937). Some of them were strongly attracted to those editing techniques such as cross-cutting and parallel montage that D. W. Griffith employed in *Intolerance* (1916). This urge for change from inside was also assisted by those who were trained overseas. Among returning directors and cameramen were Henry Kotani (1887–1972) and Thomas Kurihara (1885–1926). Kotani is considered by many the father of cameramen in Japan. He

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worked on Shōchiku's pioneering "pure drama" film, *Island Woman* (Shima no onna, 1920). The heroine is a fisherman's daughter whose lover is pursued by another woman. She was played by an actress, a first-time-ever innovation reinforced by Kotani's use of American-style flashbacks and close-ups along with subtitles.

Rival Nikkatsu did respond in kind with films such as *Two Wives* (Tsuma to Tsuma, 1922), directed by Eizō Tanaka (1886–1968). A studio showdown later that year led to a mass walkout of *onnagata*. Nikkatsu temporized again but replaced them all with actresses the following year. Clearly tradition was out and innovation was in, at least in cinema. Even the powerful *benshi* were on shaky ground in 1923 and completely out of the picture by 1928.

The *jidaigeki* period film was also reborn in the 1920s. Star director Makino left Nikkatsu in 1923 to found his own studio in Kyoto. His new style of swashbuckling hero broke with kabuki conventions, moving freely and realistically, apparently under the influence of American films with their emphasis on fast-paced, action-packed suspense. Films in this style earned the name *chambara*, a reference to the entertainment value of its brilliant period swordplay.

The seven years leading up to the coming of sound in 1930 is generally known as the golden age of silent-era *jidaigeki*, which put the more generalized *gendai geki* somewhat in the shade. Makino made memorable films such as *Chūji Kunisada* (Kunisada Chūji, 1925), derived from the hit stage play of the same title, and *The Sword of Doom* (Daibosatsu Tōge, 1927), based on a popular novel by Kaizan Nakazato (1885–1994). His fame was shared by his son, Masahiro Makino (1908–1993), best known for *Street of Masterless Samurai* (Rōningai, 1928). Nikkatsu's Daisuke Itō (1898–1981) distinguished himself with *Chūji's Travel Diary* (Chūji tabi nikki, 1927), *Servant* (Gerō, 1927), and *Man-Slashing, Horse-Slashing Sword* (Zanjin zamba, 1929). Buntarō Futagawa (1899–1966) directed *Serpent* (Orochi, 1925), a pioneer work of *chambara* realism notable for breaking the superhero mold with a masterless samurai loner protagonist as prone to human frailty as anyone.

The Talkie and the 1930s

Sound tripled the cost of making a film, but that disincentive to taking risks was countered by market pressures favoring experimentation as companies looked to compete with new trademark genres and old ones profitably modified.

Shōchiku led the way with Japan's first successful talkie, *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (Madamu to nyōbō, 1931), directed by Heinosuke Gosho

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(1902–1981).⁸ Like others soon to follow, it gave voice to the company's staple *shomingeki* (drama of everyday lower-middle-class life). Shōchiku director Yasujirō Ozu (1903–1963) resisted the talkie as long as he could, but made important contributions to this genre. The silent film *I Was Born, But . . .* (Umarete wa mita keredo, 1932) deals with a favorite Ozu theme, the unfairness of life. Ozu's touch throughout is lightly humorous and stylistically sophisticated. The repetitions and parallelisms and stationary camera—all hallmarks of his mature mastery—are already in place here.

While Shōchiku went on pleasing ladies drawn to larmoyant sentimentalism, Nikkatsu allowed some directors to explore possibilities of slice-of-life realism. A typical Shōchiku smash hit would be *A Lover's Vow* (Aisen katura, 1938), directed by Hiromasa Nomura (1905–1979). Tomu Uchida (1898–1970), a veteran of period films, helped Nikkatsu develop more socially oriented films in modern settings, such as his family saga *Theater of Life* (Jinsei gekijō, 1936).

Nikkatsu also continued to profit from its popular *jidaigeki*. Directors such as Sadao Yamanaka (1909–1938) and Hiroshi Inagaki (1905–1980) brought a certain seriousness to period drama, offering insight into the social milieu of the late Tokugawa period. Yamanaka's finest in that vein were *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (Ninjō kamufūsen, 1935) and *The Village Tattooed Man* (Machi no irezumi mono, 1935).

A third major player emerged in 1936, when the Tōhō conglomerate decided to compete across the board with films of every kind. It became a force to be reckoned with, especially in vaudeville-style comedy and musical genres. Tōhō also lavished huge sums on *jidaigeki* historical epics such as *The Ōsaka Summer Campaign* (Ōsaka natsu no jin, 1937), directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa (1896–1982).

Some directors in this decade set out to prove that mass-market appeal could accommodate highbrow scripts as well as best-seller spin-offs. They became known as *junbungaku* proponents of “pure literature.” Studio rivalry also played a part.⁹ Encouraged by the immense popularity of Uchida's *Theater of Life*, Nikkatsu commissioned other works based on thought-provoking novels. Shōchiku's *junbungaku* stars were the movement pioneer Shirō Toyoda (1906–1977) and Yasujirō Shimazu (1897–1945). They engaged with serious literature in serious ways—this in an age when ambitious fiction could appear first in various serial formats.

A second golden age of Japanese cinema is seen as taking shape in the 1930s, thanks chiefly to the varied, inventive approaches to the *gendaiigeki* genre by masters such as Kenji Mizoguchi (1898–1956), Ozu, and Shimazu.

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Mizoguchi made classics into classics and sometimes, as with *Osaka Elegy* (Naniwa erejī, 1936) and *Sisters of the Gion* (Gion no kyōdai, 1936), gave original scripts enduring life on screen.

War, Occupation, and Censorship: 1940–1951

War with China in July 1937 gave the film industry a foretaste of World War II hardship. Every aspect of creation, production, and distribution was subject to strict control. Materials were severely rationed. A board of censors scrutinized scripts in minute detail lest they promote frivolous behavior or Western notions of individual freedom. In 1941 the nation's ten film companies were reorganized as two, becoming, in effect, instruments of government policy. Nikkatsu's assets were divided between Shōchiku and Tōhō. In 1942, however, Masao Nagata managed to form the Dai-Nihon Eiga (Daiei).

Even before the rest of the world armed itself with censorship and propaganda, Japanese studios were in tune with the times. Films such as *The Whole Family Works* (Hataraku ikka, 1939) by Mikio Naruse (1905–1969) showed life on the home front imbued with the requisite patriotic fervor. The lives of ordinary soldiers at the front were depicted in films such as *Five Scouts* (Gonin no sokōhei, 1938) and *Mud and Soldiers* (Tsuchi to heitai, 1939), both directed by Tomotaka Tasaka (1902–1974) and drawing on popular novels. A year after Pearl Harbor, Tōhō released *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya* (Hawai-Marei oki kaisen, 1942), a potboiler of appropriately heroic proportions, directed by Kajirō Yamamoto (1902–1974).¹⁰

A generous budget allowed for special effects impressive for the time. Studios also glorified the past in historical “pageants” such as *The Battle of Kawanakajima* (Kawanakajima gassen, 1941) by Teinosuke Kinugasa (1896–1982).¹¹ To this category Mizoguchi also contributed a period film “without swashbuckling,” his two-part version of the Japanese epic *Chūshingura* under the title *The Loyal Forty-Seven Ronin* (Genroku Chūshingura, 1941–1942).

Films of Occupation: 1945–1951

The postwar Occupation brought every kind of change, though film censorship remained an important tool of national policy. Its aim this time was to help recast Japanese society in a distinctly different mold as directed by the Allied Supreme Command. Thirteen themes associated with the “nationalism” of the past were banned. The traditional *jidaigeki* genre suffered most, deprived of its motivating themes of feudal loyalty and heroic self-sacrifice.¹²

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Even so, the cinema industry set to work, producing 160 films in the second year of the Occupation. At least eight of those were unmistakable instruments of official policy, though some stand out as historically significant. Two dealt with women's new roles in society. *Morning of the Ōsone Family* (Ōsoneke no ashita, 1946) by Keisuke Kinoshita (1912–1999) showed two hard-pressed women in wartime learning to be assertive. Mizoguchi's *Victory of Women* (Josei no shōri, 1946) featured a successful female trial lawyer. He followed that with *The Love of Sumako the Actress* (Joyū Sumako no koi, 1947) and *My Love Burns* (Waga koi wa moenu, 1949) to complete what some consider to be a feminist trilogy.

The young Akira Kurosawa (1910–2000) responded to censorship pressures with *No Regret for Youth* (Waga seishun ni kuinashi, 1946), its plot a paradigm for liberated women seeking self-worth. *The Ball at the Anjō House* (Anjōke no butōkai, 1947) by Kōzaburo Yoshimura (1911–2000) was notable for its boldly modern cinematic style and frank approach to the astonishing spectacle of women taking charge of an aristocratic family's failing fortunes.

No amount of censorship could staunch demand. Long years of war followed by hardships of recovery filled theaters to overflowing—theaters that were in short supply since more than five hundred were bombed. Audiences were looking for entertainment, not indoctrination, so studios rushed to supply every kind of light-hearted musical and comic drama. Shōchiku's first postwar venture was *Breeze* (Soyokaze, 1945), a smash hit musical revue whose "Song of Apples" theme became a pop anthem signifying hope for the future. Tōhō's competing *Song to the Sun* (Utae taiyō, 1945) was directed by Yutaka Abe (1895–1977).

Business was booming but studios suffered their share of strikes, ideological disputes, and money troubles. Tōhō lost staff and gained a competitor when breakaway dissidents formed Shin-tōhō. Daiei, a wartime creation, lost important *jidaigeki* performers to another company, so in 1949 it shifted into melodrama with a highly successful series of *haha-mono* (mother film) tear-jerkers: *Mother and Crimson Plum Blossoms* (Haha kōbai), *Three Mothers* (Haha sannin), and *In Search of Mother* (Haha koi boshi).

A Third Golden Era: 1951–1959

Economic, political, and cultural factors all joined forces to effect a remarkable growth in Japanese cinema in the early 1950s. New construction soon restored the number of theaters to the prewar figure of 2,641. By 1959, that number had nearly tripled to 7,401.

The return to national independence with the San Francisco Peace

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Treaty of 1951 (to be effective in 1952) had a direct effect on the development of both artistic and popular cinema. For example, *jidaigeki*, especially the swashbuckling *chambara* variety, returned to captivate an audience hungry for a genre forbidden during the Occupation. This decade showed an impressive array of this genre. *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954) by Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) and the *Musashi Miyamoto* trilogy (*Musashi Miyamoto I–III*, 1954–1956) by Hiroshi Inagaki's (1905–1980) survive as examples of artistic excellence, and the radio drama turned five-part film *The Red Peacock* (*Beni kujaku*, 1954–1955) was the pinnacle of popular *jidaigeki*. In *gendaigeki* genre, release from censorship and guidelines of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers also offered filmmakers new flexibility in their choice of subject matter. Many directors turned to contemporary themes, some playing to antiwar sentiments, others to the conflict of values in a changing society. The resultant blossoming of creativity in this decade marked what has been termed the Golden Age of postwar Japanese cinema (a third golden era throughout). For example, leftist Tada-shi Imai made *The Tower of Lilies* (*Himeyuri no tō*, 1953), the antiwar film about high-school girls forced to kill themselves during the invasion of Okinawa. The ever-versatile Kinoshita's major works included *Carmen Comes Home* (*Karumen kokyō ni kaeru*, 1951), a satire on Japan's modernization, and *A Japanese Tragedy* (*Nihon no higeki*, 1952), a study of conflicting old and new values resulting in a gulf between a poor mother and her children. His fame was most closely linked with a tear-jerker melodrama charged with antiwar sentiment: *Twenty-four Eyes* (*Nijū shi no hitomi*, 1954).¹³

Outside Japan, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), the Grand Prize winner at the 1951 Venice Film Festival, awakened the international audience to the rich heritage of Japanese cinema.¹⁴ Mizoguchi vied with him for international recognition as his *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku ichidai onna*, 1952) shared the best director award (the Silver Lion) with John Ford's *The Quiet Man* at the 1952 Venice Film Festival. The following year *Ugetsu* (1953) earned him a Silver Lion.

Other Japanese directors won recognition as well. Teinosuke Kinugasa's *The Gate of Hell* (*Jigokukon*, 1954) also won the Cannes Film Festival Grand Prize while Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sanshō Dayū*, 1954) received Silver Lions at the Venice Film Festival. Inagaki also entered the international limelight with his Oscar-winning *Musashi Miyamoto Part I* (1954).

Ozu and Gosho continued to explore the quintessentially familiar theme of the lives of ordinary people. Gosho's *Where Chimneys Are Seen* (*Entotsu no mieru basho*, 1953) won an award at the 1953 Berlin Film Fes-

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tival. Despite the highly critical acclaim Ozu's films enjoyed at home, recognition abroad was rather slow to come. When finally *Tokyo Story* (Tōkyō monogatari, 1953) made its way to the 1958 London International Film Festival, it won the Sutherland Award for best picture.

At this new point of departure, the four existing firms (Tōhō, Shin-tōhō, Daiei, and Shōchiku) were joined by another, the Tōkyō Eiga Company, commonly called Tōei. Tōei made valuable contributions to popular cinema by adapting radio *jidaigeki* for film and putting them in contact with a vast new market of children and teenagers.

Shōchiku began the decade with a familiar emphasis on melodrama and the *shomingeki* drama of lower-middle-class life. The Tōhō captured the white-collar market with a comedy series featuring a company president. The company is also credited with inventing the Japanese monster science fiction film, the prime example being *Godzilla* (Gojira, 1954).

Daiei was notably successful with art films in the 1950s, producing international prize winners such as *Rashomon* and *Ugetsu*. Their popular film success, however, lay in creating a boom in the subgenre named for their series titled *Sex Stories of Teenagers* (Jūdai no seiten, 1953–1954). Nikkatsu was in a difficult position when the company resumed production in 1953. Prosperity came quite by accident in 1956 with the so-called Sun-Tribe (Taiyō-zoku) film. Its subject was a group of youngsters whose response to a materialistic society was the pursuit of sex and violence.¹⁵

Television and Retrenchment: The 1960s

By 1963 television was reaching 65 percent of the nation's viewing audience. That same year, the film audience shrank to half of its 1955 peak of 1,127 million. Clearly, the film industry had to retrench and reform its products and marketing strategy in line with audience tastes (or popular cinema). Plagued by poor management and a series of strikes, Shin-tōhō went bankrupt in 1961. Tōei hoped to replace its lost *jidaigeki* lead with more timely contemporary Yakuza films (gangsters and professional gamblers genre films). The highlight was *The Story of Japanese Yakuza* (Nihon kyōkaku-den), with eleven films produced from 1964 to 1971.

The Tōhō Company continued to remain strong in its specialties of white-collar comedy and science fiction. In the latter, it continued to populate the screen with Godzilla and his monster look-alikes. Nikkatsu, the most active company next to Tōei, resorted to skillful management of established idols cast in a series of action comedies and the *Migrant Bird* (Watari-dori) series (1959–1962; nine titles).

Daiei profits remained substantial, thanks to a number of action drama

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series with popular stars. Among them were the *Zatoichi* and *Evil Man* (Akumyō) series, both with actor Shintarō Katsu (1931–1997) and running 1961–1969.

Shōchiku fared poorly in the 1960s owing to a decline in audience interest in domestic drama, melodrama, and comedy. However, in 1969 a Shōchiku comedy comeback began with the first in a series that would continue for the following twenty-seven years: Yōji Yamada's *It's Tough Being a Man* (Otoko wa tsurai yo), commonly known as the *Tora-san* series, the parody of the Yakuza film featuring the vagabond Tora who never quite manages a break free of his home ties.

On the artistic cinema front, a goodly number of new names arrived on the “New Wave,” as it was called, because of elements of experiment and controversy reminiscent of French *nouvelle vague*. Notable among them were Nagisa Ōshima (b. 1932), Masahiro Shinoda (b. 1931), and Yoshishige (Kijū) Yoshida (b. 1933), all from Shōchiku. Using bold new techniques, they dealt with themes related to violence and sex to explore new problems confronting postwar Japanese society.¹⁶ Their effort in this line was exemplified by Ōshima's *Cruel Story of Youth* (Seishun zankoku monogatari, 1960).

Nikkatsu's Shōhei Imamura (b. 1926) challenged these New Wave directors. He did so by pursuing the subject of survival instinct in modern Japan with focus on women in the lowest strata of society, as shown in *Pigs and Battleships* (Buta to gunkan, 1961) and *The Insect Woman* (Nippon konchūki, 1963).

In the *jidaigeki* genre, Masaki Kobayashi (1916–1999) made memorable works charged with his antifeudal sentiments, most notably *Harakiri* (Sepuku, 1962) and *Rebellion* (Jōiuchi, 1967).

Production Innovation: The 1970s

In a decade of continuing decline, the cinema industry was forced to make more adjustments that altered the character of some studios considerably. Daiei went bankrupt in 1971. Nikkatsu eventually stopped making regular feature-length films and began with the introduction of a new genre requiring somewhat lower budgets, fewer staff, and reduced production time. This was the so-called *roman poruno* (the American designation would be “soft porn”).

Faced with the declining commercial values of stars on a declining cycle, Tōei introduced a successful new series, Kinji Fukasaku's five-part Yakuza film, *Combat without Code* (Jingi naki tatakai, 1973–1974), a twenty-five-year saga of the rise and fall of various Yakuza.¹⁷

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Shōchiku's Yōji Yamada (b. 1931) continued to figure prominently with the vastly popular *Tora-san* series, adding another twenty installments in the 1970s. (The series, a major source of Shōchiku's revenue, ended in 1996 with the lead actor's death.)

Tōhō did not do particularly well in popular genres in the early 1970s. Their comedies became hackneyed, and audiences turned away from their *jidaigeki* offerings. A profitable exception was the *Lone Wolf with a Child* (Kozure Ōkami) series (1972), with six installments. The first three installments were directed by veteran Kenji Misumi (1921–1975). The series featured a banished shogunal decapitator that originated in a comic book. Tōhō's precarious finances were given a shot in the arm by a disaster film, *Japan Sinks* (Nihon chinbotsu, 1973), adapted from Sakyō Komatsu's best-selling book.¹⁸

In 1976, the Kadokawa Publishing Company entered the cinema industry, with results that would prove to be far reaching. Their Kadokawa Film Company ignored double billing in order to pour their immense capital into single large-scale popular features. Their first production was Kon Ichikawa's murder mystery *The Inugami Family* (Inuegamike no ichizoku, 1976), based on the popular mystery novel by Seishi Yokomizo. It proved to be the highest-grossing film of the last seventy-some years. Kadokawa's publishing connections were the silver lining of their enterprise, with massive advertising organized to promote best-sellers, film versions, and soundtrack recordings simultaneously.

So Much, So New: The 1980s Onward

The year 1980 marked the beginning of the decade of the Japanese bubble economy, which burst in 1991. That spurt of "miracle" growth had an interesting effect on Japanese cinema. A retrenchment on the part of the major studios forced them to cut back on production and concentrate on the far more lucrative business of distribution. Independent filmmakers backed by outside enterprises rushed in to fill the resulting void.

The Kadokawa Publishing Company continued to diversify by marketing books and films together. Its film production division actively engaged in dramatizing popular mystery novels. Fuji Television also produced blockbusters such as Koreyoshi Kurahara's *The Antarctic Story* (Nankyoku monogatari, 1983) and Kon Ichikawa's 1985 remake of *The Harp of Burma* (Biruma no tategoto, 1954). Individual entrepreneurs with no connections to the cinema industry also invested their share of a general surplus of profits for reasons of art, not gain. Generous sponsorship by a former steel mill owner

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enabled Kōhei Oguri (b. 1945) to make his debut black-and-white film, *Muddy River* (*Doro no kawa*, 1981), one of the best postwar films about the fate of children.

After the bubble economy burst in May 1991, filmmaking became increasingly difficult. In 1993, Nikkatsu's bankruptcy was followed by Kado-kawa's sudden decision to halt all film production for a while. Even so, a number of independent production companies remained successful, among them the Santory-sponsored Argo Project, a consortium of independent filmmakers. Their productions ran the gamut from love story to comedy by a young generation of directors. Apt examples were Takashi Ishii's *Original Sin* (*Shindemo ii*, 1992), inspired by James M. Cain's classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and a major box office hit, Yaguchi Shonobu's *Waterboys* (2002). Software maker Pony Canyon partnered with the advertising agency Hakuhodo to produce youth-oriented films.¹⁹

The 1980s turn away from the studio system redirected the nation's cinema by means of two distinct phenomena: the emergence of independent directors, most of them young; and a new line of cinema calculated to appeal to film aficionados, especially young ones with "disposable income."²⁰ This combination affected literary sources too—light novels and even cartoons, very often scripted with the help of the director himself.

A sampling of those who have gained recognition worldwide might begin with actor-turned-director Jūzō Itami (1933–1998), whose satirical comedies include *The Funeral* (*Ososhiki*, 1984), *Tampopo* (1985), and the two-part *A Taxing Woman* (*Marusa no onna*, 1987–1988), who probed the question of "what it means to be Japanese."²¹ A second-generation Korean, Yōichi Sai (b. 1949) dealt with themes related to minorities in Japan in *All under the Moon* (*Tsuki wa dotchi ni dete iru*, 1993) and *The Curse of the Pig* (*Buta no mukui*, 1999). The multitalented Takeshi Kitano (b. 1947) made a number of violence-oriented films culminating in *Fireworks* (*Hanabi*), which won the coveted Golden Lion at the 1997 Venice Film Festival.

Some directors who made their mark while still in their twenties and thirties benefited from the PIA Film Festival. Established in 1977 by the Tokyo entertainment weekly magazine *PIA*, the festival served as one of very few avenues open to a new generation of filmmaker hopefuls. A number of PIA winners went on to make a successful transition from small-scale 8 mm/16 mm to commercially viable 35 mm films. Among them were Yoshimitsu Morita (b. 1950), Shinobu Yaguchi (b. 1967), Shinya Tsukamoto (b. 1960), and Kiyoshi Kurosawa (b. 1955). Two names also closely linked with the PIA festival were Naomi Kawase (b. 1969), a female director on the rise, and Masayuki Suō (b. 1956), director of *Shall We Dance?*

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(1996). Kawase's semi-documentary *Suzaku* (Moe no Suzaku), the winner of the Caméra d'Or (best first feature film) at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, brought a personal touch to issues of rural family life deeply rooted in Japanese society.

Among those who had worked in the media were Shunji Iwai (b. 1963) and Hirokazu Koreeda (b. 1962). Iwai's first feature-length film, *Love Letter* (1995), was a romantic drama about a young girl who sends a letter to her deceased lover. Its familiar theme, well served by stylish innovations, got the attention of urbanites who filled a Tokyo theater with standing-room-only crowds for fourteen weeks.²² Koreeda gained international recognition in 1995 with *Maboroshi* (Maboroshi no hikari), a dramatic account of a widow's obsession with death. A number of festivals singled it out as the first feature-length film of a promising new talent and tendency.

The *anime* animation film was perhaps the most influential genre so far as the international audience was concerned. Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1988), adapted from his own comic book, was a phenomenal success in the United States.

Hayao Miyazaki (b. 1941) and Isao Takahata (b. 1935) collaborated on a number of projects at Studio Ghibli backed by the Tokuma Publishing Company. Their first spectacular breakthrough came in 1988 with Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro* (Tonari no Totoro) and Takahata's *The Grave of Fireflies* (Hotaru no haka). The former, voted best picture of the year by the prestigious film journal *Kinema jumpō*, outranked work with more serious themes. In 1997 Miyazaki wrote, directed, and produced the astonishingly successful *Princess Mononoke* (Mononoke-hime), the highest-grossing film of all time. Hayao Miyazaki's animation *Spirited Away* (Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi, 2002) made history by earning the all-time highest gross in Japanese cinema. It also won the award for Best Director at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival and more recently won a 2003 Oscar in the Best Animation category.

How does the Japanese cinema industry fare from now? That is beyond the scope of this book and everybody's guess.

A Few Notes on Methodology

This book offers intensive analyses of sixteen individual films altogether. My selection criteria are wide-ranging, in an attempt to address numerous concerns. The films' production dates range from prewar to the present, each representing an important phase of Japan's cinema history. Works by a young generation, such as those of Suō and Morita, neatly balance classics

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in Japanese cinema. Some films represent specific genres. For example, *The Mistress* is a so-called *bun-gei-eiga*, a screen adaptation of a Japanese literary work. *The Family Game* is a satirical comedy. *My Neighbor Totoro* is an animated film. The *Musashi Miyamoto* trilogy is a staple of the *jidaigeki*, the samurai film genre. Also included is a work by Kawase, one of the leading female directors today. Readers looking for extensive analyses of classics such as *Rashomon* (1950), *Ugetsu* (1953), and *Tokyo Story* (1953) will find them in my earlier book, *Cinema East: A Critical Study of Major Japanese Films* (1983). They are also widely discussed by other scholars and critics.

Critics agree that Japanese cinema is very rich in masterpieces of silent film. Ideally, at least one chapter here should be devoted to a representative example, even though very few such films are available with English subtitles in the United States. Kinugasa's *A Page of Madness* (Kurutta ippeji, 1926), Ozu's *I Was Born, But . . .* (Umarete wa mita keredo, 1932), and *Story of Floating Weeds* (Ukigusa monogatari, 1934) come to mind. However, these works have been widely discussed by others and I do not think I can really add anything constructive.²³ I would add that *A Page of Madness* is more suited for graduate students of cinema studies, given the director's sophisticated experiments with Expressionism.

Students and teachers will benefit from the fact that except for *Suzaku*, these films are readily available on video and/or DVD with English subtitles.²⁴ (I am hoping that Kawase's *Suzaku* will soon be made available.)

Since this book seeks to serve a general readership, each chapter opens with a brief introduction whose purpose is to locate the film to be discussed and its director in the larger context of Japanese cinema history. Readers familiar with the larger scheme of things may wish to begin with the body of the text, which is devoted to a detailed reading of the film.

It is important to note that this is not a book on film theory. The readings it offers are not tied to any absolute theoretical stance or ideological commitment. My objectives are those of a classroom teacher and suitably modest. The main text of each chapter will reinforce the student's grasp of two areas of inquiry essential to reading Japanese cinema. The first has to do with cultural specificity: What does the viewer need to know for a meaningful interpretation of a film? That question leads to the next: How does any particular critical method work and what can it tell us about a film?

If pressed to account for my critical method in this book, I would describe it as eclectic, a carefully considered combination of New Criticism, neo-formalism, and a cultural/historical approach. Here let me briefly outline a uniform approach to film. I begin by treating each film as a finished

Introduction

product rather than as a work in progress. I consider each work as a self-contained entity with its own structure.

I also view works from two perspectives: internal and external. The internal perspective studies structure and function: the makeup of parts and how they work together. I will show how structural unity comes by way of complex (and sometimes puzzling) arrangements of basic elements: characters, symbols, events, settings, and the like. And of course since Japanese culture and society are somewhat, if not entirely, alien to their experience, readers will learn to respect the importance of cultural specificity related to these elements. This is a complex business requiring many a shift of critical insight. The film marshals various effects in order to clarify a central problem: the protagonist's manner of relating to his or her world, or to the external world. The protagonist makes choices—issues—in response to the central problem that the given work features front and center. Some choices that are available may seem mutually exclusive; others, uneasily compatible; still others, apparently “free,” a matter of roads taken or not taken. In any event, the protagonist's behavior offers us important clues to the worldview at work, whether it is to be taken as tragic or comic, say, or romantic, or ironic.

The other perspective—the external one—refers to the structure the film exhibits in relation to its audience. Seen from this perspective, the work invites us to relate to it in many ways. We are to have feelings about it, to become involved, to make judgments about the good and the bad in characters, actions, and values. As critics, we must decide whether we are being asked to take up an attitude of simple identification with the aspect of the work at hand or perhaps to reject it or maybe to react, to some extent, both ways at once. Can we accept the outcome of the protagonist's action as a logical consequence of his/her or the work's worldview? In short, other issues included here relate to the viewer's point of view, degree of notion of good or bad, and acceptance or refusal of the film's worldview.

Though the focus of the main text of this book tends to be on the internal structure, here and there I do consider how the director's use of certain elements deeply ingrained in the Japanese cultural context—songs for example—is geared to manipulate the viewer's point of view. Needless to say, all the devices of internal and external structure (and deviances from them too) are brought together by the third basic element of cinematic art: technique or stylistics. This is discussed separately, when necessary.

Though the critical format is uniform throughout, the basic constituents of each film—like any cultural icon—will vary from film to film, with analysis varying accordingly. This difference is reflected in subheads I have

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created for the sake of readability. Each chapter, however, ends with an intensive analysis of the final sequence or scene that clearly demonstrates how the director resolves issues or, as may be the case, leaves them as open.

Notes on Some Practical Matters

Long experience in the classroom has taught me the importance of everyday language and a straightforward, commonsense approach to film analysis. I have written this book in the style I use for teaching—not the style I would use in addressing other specialist scholars. This means that the book is light on critical jargon, even as I look for ways to elicit complex and sophisticated responses from students new to the art of reading Japanese films.

For the sake of readability, Japanese names are printed in the Western manner, that is to say, the first name followed by the given name. Macrons are used for Japanese long vowels. The English release title of a film is followed by the Japanese title in parentheses. For a film never released with English subtitles, I have provided a translation of the title. I have also done away with a glossary of Japanese and film terms in order to avoid redundancy. The first is provided in Richie's *A Hundred Years of Japanese Cinema* and the latter is a staple of many books for introductory film classes.