

THE MIDNIGHT EYE GUIDE TO

NEW JAPANESE FILM



REVIEWS OF 97 FILMS
PROFILES OF 20 CONTEMPORARY FILMMAKERS

Tom Mes and
Jasper Sharp

Foreword by
Hideo Nakata

THE MIDNIGHT EYE GUIDE TO **NEW JAPANESE FILM**



Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp

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Hideo Nakata**

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THE MIDNIGHT EYE GUIDE TO

NEW

JAPANESE FILM

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORIES OF
↓ **KINJI FUKASAKU & TOMIO AOKI**

FOREWORD

by Hideo Nakata

In 1991, I decided to go to England for a year. I thought it was important for me to get away from Japan for a while and think over my situation within the Japanese film industry. I was an assistant director working for the Nikkatsu film studio, which had at that time ceased producing feature films and was just making TV dramas or straight-to-video films. I couldn't think of any way to get out of the situation other than by taking a break in a distant foreign country.

Thanks to this decision, I experienced a complete change in my career during the 1990s. The Japanese film industry seemed to go through a complete change as well. Nikkatsu went bankrupt in 1993. Shochiku decided to sell all of its production facilities in 1999, closing its lot in Ōfuna in 2000. These were two of the five major studios in Japan, both with long and glorious histories.

Despite this, there were many filmmakers who made their first theatrical features during the decade. Half of the directors introduced in this book made their debuts in the '90s. Many of them were independent filmmakers. I also shot an independent

documentary film in England before I directed my first studio feature film. My desperate hunger for making films overcame the financial difficulties. In the meantime, Japanese film studios seemed to be afraid of taking risks in film production. This kind of mentality gradually killed the enthusiasm of the people who worked at the studios. Then, independent filmmakers were spotlighted. They knew how to make good films on low budgets and their enthusiasm never faded.

It was foreign film festival directors who responded to their works very quickly. One of the strongest bridges between the festivals and the independent filmmakers was Takenori Sentō, who produced two of my films. Vigorously and strategically, he sent his films to a large number of foreign film festivals. It was a good opportunity for him to sell the films as well as to receive awards. This may sound quite normal, but surprisingly, most of the Japanese film companies were rather reluctant to enter their own films unless invited. They did not think Japanese films were competitive enough in the market. Sentō is a pioneering figure in this respect.

The '90s was the decade of starting over

for the Japanese film industry. Some film critics like to say, "Japanese filmmaking seems very active now. And the films are received very well at foreign festivals." It may be true in a sense, but I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic, because starting over in the '90s also meant the end of traditional studio filmmaking.

Every Japanese filmmaker has to find his own way to keep going. Curiosity for the new and envy for other good filmmakers are

my personal drives. It is obvious that Japanese film production and distribution will become increasingly borderless, not only in East Asia but also universally. Some might say, "Let's make films which are appealing to foreign audiences." I firmly believe a very Japanese film that is different from others can easily cross borders. Although I am now trying to make Hollywood studio movies, it is important for me to make uniquely Japanese films, as well.

▼ INTRODUCTION

This book grew out of four years of watching and writing about Japanese cinema for the website MidnightEye.com. In the course of those four years we've had the great privilege and fortune to meet and speak with some of the leading figures in the Japanese film industry, as well as watch a huge number of brilliant films.

The original idea for this volume was to create something along the lines of "Midnight Eye: The Book," collecting the best reviews, interviews, and essays from the website into a single volume. In the course of developing this concept, however, the idea grew into something much more ambitious. Rather than simply gathering what already existed, we decided to use that material as the starting point for a brand new book, one that would focus on who we felt were the leading filmmakers working in Japan today.

The vast majority of the material in this book is entirely new. Even in the rare cases where we used writing that was previously published on the website, this was extensively rewritten, expanded, updated, and revised. We did this not only because our opinions and knowledge have evolved

over these past four years (in a good way, we hope), but also to make the writing fit in with the format of this book. So, not to worry, you have not spent your precious pennies on something that is already available for free on the net.

The choice to focus on contemporary Japanese cinema was inspired above all by the dearth of proper writing on the subject. Aside from Mark Shilling's fine, if somewhat outdated, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, what writing there is largely remains somewhat superficial, usually with one-paragraph, or at most one-page descriptions of contemporary filmmakers and their work. With the amount of talent that has emerged in Japan over the past two decades, the international acclaim many of them have received, and above all the challenging and probing nature of their work, this writing certainly hasn't done justice to its subject.

The existence of this watershed between past and present Japanese cinema is understandable, though. The watershed in question is embodied by the collapse of the Japanese studio system, a gradual process that lasted decades but came to a head in the late 1970s. The six major studios (Toho,

Shochiku, Nikkatsu, Toei, Daiei, and Shin-toho) collectively formed the Japanese film industry, and the work of acknowledged masters like Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Yasujiro Ozu were the products of this system. Even as the positions of the studios started to weaken, "New Wave" directors like Nagisa Oshima and Shōhei Imamura began setting up their own independent production companies to make fascinating, idiosyncratic work. But the New Wave reached its peak in the '60s, becoming less productive in the decade that followed. Once the studios had bitten the dust there seemed little activity at all happening in Japan in the 1980s, certainly from a foreign viewpoint. The year 1983 yielded the Cannes Film Festival selections for Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (a British co-production) and Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama*, the latter being awarded the Palme d'Or. These and two high-profile Akira Kurosawa films (*Kagemusha* and *Ran*, both foreign co-productions) remain the only international accomplishments of note for much of the decade. The 1980s was a period in which even former iconoclasts became conformists, churning out crowd-pleasers for wealthy but cinematically challenged private film producers, simply to be able to keep working. The resulting films were, for the most part, hardly reason for keeping much faith in the future of Japanese cinema.

Yet, at the same time as the studios lost their foothold and just about anything else that wasn't essential for their survival, a renaissance was already under way. The second half of the '70s saw the slow emergence of true independent filmmaking: young enthusiasts with 8mm cameras making their own short films and features

on shoestring budgets. This development took over a decade to come to a boil, resulting in a full-blown re-emergence in the 1990s when a new generation of filmmakers appeared, the vast majority coming from roots that lay outside the traditional film industry. They came from 8mm underground experimentalism, from the ranks of film critics, from the erotic "pink film" or porn, from television, and from the straight-to-video filmmaking that had shot up in the late '80s in the wake of the boom in home video player ownership. These were young filmmakers whose attitudes and philosophies of cinema were entirely different from those of the old studio period. They were independent in spirit: artists with nothing to lose, but with everything to gain.

Today, these filmmakers are regulars on the international film festival circuit, critically lauded, and the subject of cult worship by a growing legion of devotees the world over. As more and more of their films are released theatrically and particularly on DVD around the world, some are even courted by Hollywood. The phenomenon of remakes of Japanese hits, kick-started by the American version of Hideo Nakata's *The Ring*, has now advanced to a point where the directors themselves are invited to Tinseltown to helm the remakes of their own films, as with Takashi Shimizu and his tale of ghostly apparitions *The Grudge* (*Juon*).

There is every reason to look at Japanese cinema today with great interest. It's always much more challenging and exciting to venture into uncharted territory rather than walk the well-trodden paths. Therefore this book is an attempt to give contemporary Japanese film its due as well as an attempt to fill a gap, carefully avoiding laments about

the good old days. Those days certainly were good. But so are these. And there is no reason why we shouldn't treat them with the same respect, devotion, and enthusiasm as the past.

Certainly, all is not rosy. Japanese filmmakers for the most part still have to work with very low budgets and government support for the industry is minimal, but compared to fifteen or twenty years ago there has been great progress and a huge pool of talent currently occupies the directors' seats. This book attempts to present a selection from that talent pool, presenting twenty of its leading lights and their work, plus a good number more besides. This is not a book that compares figures, but one that salutes and makes an effort to understand and value the work of some of the best filmmakers in world cinema today.

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Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp

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THE MIDNIGHT EYE GUIDE TO

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CHAPTER 1

Seijun Suzuki

鈴木清順

“What Suzuki represents to me is anarchy. He’s a complete anarchist, and he’s the only person in Japanese cinema who could get away with a film like *Story of Sorrow and Sadness*. I was born in 1964 and so I was in my early teens when I experienced punk, and on me Jean-Luc Godard and Seijun Suzuki had the same sort of impact.”—Shinji Aoyama

Japanese cinema has been lucky to have such a colorful figure as Seijun Suzuki as one of its ambassadors. Hovering over four decades of filmmaking like a kindly old wizard, with his horn-rimmed specs and scraggly goatee he certainly looks the part of the bohemian artist. Indeed, in 1985 he was even voted “Best Dressed Man” by the Tokyo Fashion Society.

Some have seen him as an iconoclast, a cinematic rebel out to break every rule in the filmmaking book—more likely discarding it entirely—and one whose increasingly mischievous sense of humor was to land him in hot water with his employers at Nikkatsu in the late '60s. Others view him as an aesthetic genius, reconfiguring and reinventing cinema to fit his own uniquely skewed visual perception of the world. The self-effacing Suzuki would probably shrug off both assessments and laugh, wondering what all the fuss is about. The truth is, whichever way you want

to look at it, for more than forty years Suzuki has adorned our screens with some of the most colorful, extraordinary, unpredictable, and downright fun pieces of visual entertainment that are likely to be found anywhere in world cinema.

Suzuki’s films are marked out by a style which seems to be devoid of any influence from outside sources. They work to their own peculiar logic, and one which often seems based more on aesthetic than narrative concerns. Why does the nail polish of Reiko, the central character in *Story of Sorrow and Sadness*, dramatically change in hue through yellows and blacks in key scenes? Why is there a sandstorm raging outside the window as a heroin-addicted prostitute receives a whipping from her pimp in *Youth of the Beast*? Why does Tetsuya Watari’s renegade gangster in *Tokyo Drifter* continually break into song between his numerous violent scuffles? Suzuki would doubtless answer all of these questions with the same no-nonsense pragmatism as he did in an interview with Kōshi Ueno for his 1986 book, *Suzuki Seijun, Zen Eiga* [trans: Suzuki Seijun, all his films]. When asked why he never followed the standard shot-reverse-shot technique of matching the eyelines when two lovers speak, instead having them seemingly gazing offscreen into space, his reply was:

"Yes, that's right, I never use shot-reverse-shot in those cases. When a man and a woman talk about love in Japan, they don't look each other in the eye. They look at a certain part of the body. In these cases I focus on that part of the body, a woman's hips or legs, for example. In foreign films you hardly ever see two lovers looking into each other's eyes from very close up, whereas in Japanese films, especially historical ones, they do. I think this has to do with the color of the eyes. Because foreigners have light-colored eyes, they only see a reflection of themselves when they look into each other's eyes."

Of course, Seijun Suzuki wasn't always a filmmaker. Born in Nihonbashi, central Tokyo, on May 24, 1923, as Seitarō Suzuki, he was

barely out of high school when he was drafted into the army and sent off to fight in the Pacific War. Rescued from a sinking ship en route to Taiwan after it was attacked by the American air force, he returned to a rubble-strewn Japan once the war had ended.

If we are to believe his own account of things, Suzuki's entry into the film industry came because it was the first job he could find in the turmoil that followed in the wake of Japan's defeat. Having failed the entrance exams to Tokyo University, in 1946 he instead enrolled in the film department in Kamakura Academy before he entered Shochiku's nearby studios in Ōfuna as an assistant director in the same year. The studios would become the breeding ground for a generation of new talent such as Nagisa Ōshima, Masahiro Shinoda, and Shōhei Imamura. Like

Filmography

1956

- *Harbor Toast: Victory Is in Our Grasp* (Minato no Kanpai: Shōri o Wagate ni) (a.k.a. *Cheers at the Harbor: Triumph in Our Hands*)
- *Pure Emotions of the Sea* (Hozuna wa Utau: Umi no Junjō)
- *Satan's Town* (Akuma no Machi)

1957

- *Inn of the Floating Weeds* (Ukigusa no Yado)
- *Eight Hours of Terror* (Hachijikan no Kyōfu)
- *The Naked Woman and the Gun* (Rajo to Kenjū)

1958

- *Beauty of the Underworld* (Ankokugai no Bijo) (a.k.a. *Underworld Beauty*)
- *The Spring That Didn't Come* (Fumihazushita Haru)
- *Young Breasts* (Aoi Chibusa)
- *The Voice without a Shadow* (Kagenaki Koe)

1959

- *Love Letter* (Rabū Retta)
- *Passport to Darkness* (Ankoku no Ryōken)
- *Age of Nudity* (Suppadaka no Nenrei)

1960

- *Aim at the Police Van* (Sono Gosōsha o Nerae)
- *Sleep of the Beast* (Kemono no Nemuri)
- *Clandestine Zero Line* (Mikkō Zero Rain)
- *Everything Goes Wrong* (Subete ga Kurutteru)
- *Fighting Delinquents* (Kutabare Gurentai)

1961

- *Tokyo Knights* (Tōkyō Kishitai)
- *Reckless Boss* (Muteppō Taishō) (a.k.a. *The Big Boss Who Needs No Gun*)
- *The Man With the Hollow-Tip Bullets* (Sandanjū no Otoko) (a.k.a. *The Man With a Shotgun*)
- *The Wind-Of-Youth Group Crosses the Mountain Pass* (Tōge o Wataru Wakai Kaze) (a.k.a. *New Wind over the Mountain*)

- *Blood Red Water in the Channel* (Kaikyō, Chi ni Somete) (a.k.a. *Bloody Channel*)
- *Million Dollar Match* (Hyakuman Doru o Tatakidase) (a.k.a. *Million Dollar Smash and Grab*)

1962

- *High-Teen Yakuza* (Haitin Yakuza)
- *Those Who Bet on Me* (Ore ni Kaketa Yatsura) (a.k.a. *The Guys Who Put Money on Me*)

1963

- *Detective Bureau 2-3: Go to Hell, Bastards* (Tantei Jimusho 2-3: Kutabare Akutōdomo)
- *Youth of the Beast* (Yajū no Seishun) (a.k.a. *The Wild Beast of Youth / Wild Youth / The Young Rebel / The Brute*)
- *Bastard* (Akutarō)
- *Kanto Wanderer* (Kantō Mushoku)

1964

- *The Flower and the Angry Waves* (Hana to Dotō)