

Mark Schilling



JAPANESE
FILM

Contemporary Japanese Film

by Mark Schilling



Weatherhill
Boston & London

To Donald Richie, for making it all possible.

Weatherhill
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Preface

The first question I should answer is “why?” It is the question I hear most often from new acquaintances, foreign or Japanese, when I tell them I review Japanese films and write about the Japanese film industry. “Why Japanese films?” they want to know, the implication being, why bother? Weren’t most of the best ones made decades ago? Isn’t the Japanese film industry trundling down the slope to oblivion?

This attitude has a basis in certain unpleasant facts. In 1960 the Japanese film industry released 547 films—an all-time peak. In 1998 it released only 249. In that same period, its share of the local market declined from seventy-eight percent to thirty percent. Also, no director working today equals Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, or Kenji Mizoguchi as a universally acknowledged master. Takeshi Kitano may have won the Golden Lion prize at the 1997 Venice Film Festival for *Hana-Bi* (Fireworks)—an accolade that propelled him into the directorial front ranks—but his films have yet to surpass *Tokyo Monogatari* (Tokyo Story) or *Shichinin no Samurai* (Seven Samurai) on critics’ all-time best ten lists. (Given the conservatism of these lists, perhaps they never will, but that’s another essay.)

While containing a kernel of truth, the view that Japanese films have long since seen their best days can also be a cover for ignorance. Many classics of Japanese cinema are commercially available on subtitled videocassettes and discs, while many newer films are not, which means that, for most foreign-film scholars, critics, and fans, they simply don’t exist. Overseas distribution of new Japanese films has improved in the past decade, with more film festival screenings and theatrical releases, but few foreign filmgoers, even those who travel the festival circuit or live in major cities, see more than a small fraction of the total output. This is not to say that there are dozens of modern masterpieces out there waiting to be discovered, only that many recent Japanese films deserve more international attention than they are getting.

Thus my interest in Japanese films when the *Japan Times*—Japan’s leading English-language daily newspaper—offered me a regular reviewing job in 1989. There wasn’t a lot I could say about *Jurassic Park* that hadn’t been said a hundred times before, but I could be among the first to write in English about Rokuro Mochizuki, Takashi Ishii, Takashi Miike, Jun Ichikawa or other Japanese directors doing excellent, if not always appreciated, work. Given the circulation and readership of the *Japan Times*, I couldn’t

do much to bring their films to the attention of the outside world, but I could do something—and that gave me reason enough to continue.

At the same time, I never considered myself a cheerleader for the Japanese film industry. My first obligation was to the newspaper's readers, not the directors or producers or PR flacks. If a director was a charming fellow who gave a terrific interview, but his latest film was a botch, then I had to say so. This may seem obvious, but among writers on Japanese films, too often it is not.

The second question I should answer is what, if anything, has changed in the ten years since I started. Structurally, the industry of 1999 resembles that of 1989. Three major distributors with their own exhibition chains—Toho, Toei and Shochiku—still dominate the industry mainstream, while independents still face an uphill struggle to get their films financed and released. Also, the majors are still largely run by graying executives who react to trends rather than set them, and prefer the tried-and-true to the new. Looking at their schedules for 1989 and 1999, one sees the same holiday animation for the kiddies, the period films for the oldsters. The directors and even the stars of the latter are often of the same generation as the executives giving the greenlight.

Yet cracks have appeared in once-impregnable industry facades. At the beginning of the decade, the majors were still block-booking their domestic films the way they had for years, while allowing their exhibition infrastructure to deteriorate. Despite the occasional renovation or construction of a downtown theater complex, the number of theaters continued to decline as more theater owners in the provinces shut their doors. The downward drift, said industry wise men, was all but inevitable. The mass audience might leave the blue tube for the *pachinko* parlor, but seldom for the movie palace. Meanwhile, in the competition for a shrinking pie, Hollywood was just too strong. How, the wise men asked, could even bigger-budgeted Japanese films compete head-to-head with Hollywood stars and effects? Better to play the demographic edges, where the local product still had an advantage. Godzilla and Tora-san forever!

By 1999, however, the multiplex building boom launched in the early 1990s by foreign-backed operators had not only stopped the slide in screens and admissions, but was transforming the moviegoing experience for millions of Japanese. Instead of trekking hours to antiquated downtown theaters, residents of suburbs and provincial cities now had a choice of eight or nine screens in one nearby location, with all the American-style comforts and high-tech trimmings.

Unfortunately for domestic filmmakers, the advent of the multiplex did not result in an increase in market share. In 1989 Japanese films claimed a 46.6 percent share of the market. By 1998, this figure had fallen to 30.2 percent. Though one may argue that *Titanic* was mostly responsible for the plunge in 1998—it smashed the all-time earnings record that year with sixteen billion yen in film rentals—the general trend was nonetheless downward.

Hit by a string of box office disappointments, Shochiku and Toei fell ever farther behind leader Toho during the decade, with Shochiku bringing up the rear. In 1989 Shochiku and its subsidiary Shochiku-Fuji accounted for four of the eight domestic films that earned one billion yen or more in film rentals, with Toho and Toei splitting the remaining four. In 1998 Toho distributed seven of the nine Japanese films that topped the one-billion-yen mark, while Toei claimed the rest. Shochiku, on the other hand, had not a one-billion-yen film since the last installment of its signature Tora-san series, in 1996.

Meanwhile, the majors were filling more of their lineups with films from outside producers. Shochiku tried to reverse this trend in 1997 with its Cinema Japanesque project for producing and distributing low-budget films, but quickly retrenched when the first Cinema Japanesque slate failed at the box office.

To improve its fortunes, Shochiku restructured its operations, beginning in January with the ouster of a father-and-son top management team. In March 1999 the company announced that it would no longer block-book domestic films in its theater chain. Toei and Toho did not follow Shochiku's lead, but by the end of the decade the block-booking system looked more likely to crumble than recover.

Despite the various troubles of the major distributors, the number of domestic releases grew over the course of the decade, from 255 in 1989 to 278 in 1998. One reason was the still strong demand for product from the video industry. In 1998 national video-shop sales rose 6.8 percent to ¥409.5 billion, with much shelf space given over to new domestic animation and action titles.

Another was the stubborn vitality, against all odds, of the independent film sector. In the first half of the decade the most active of the indie film companies was Argo Project, a consortium of six independent producers that, with the backing of beverage-maker Suntory, tried to break the near-monopoly of the majors on exhibition and distribution by producing and screening its own films in two theaters, one in Tokyo and one in Osaka. Although enjoying several critical and commercial successes, beginning with Shun Nakahara's award-winning ensemble drama *Sakura no Sono* (The Cherry Orchard) in 1990, Argo Project was handicapped by an unfavorable rental contract for its theater in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo that made it hard to turn a profit on all but the most popular films.

With the red ink in its distribution and exhibition business mounting, Argo changed its name to Argo Pictures in April 1993 and shifted its focus to film development and production, while linking with other companies to gain wider distribution for its films. Hits, however, were hard to come by and the red ink did not recede. In January 1995, after screening fifty-four films in four-and-a-half years, the Shinjuku theater closed its doors and, later that year, Argo suspended feature-film production.

Despite Argo's failure, a growing number of mini-theaters began screening independent Japanese films during the decade, and several mini-theater operators, including Tokyo's Theater Shinjuku and Eurospace, started investing in film production. Also, the rise of new-media venues, including cable and satellite channels, created more demand for independent films. One prominent investor was the Wowow satellite station, which financed the J Movie Wars series of low-budget shorts and feature films beginning in 1992, and underwrote the 1998 launch of Suncent CinemaWorks, the stand-alone production unit of J Movie Wars producer Takenori Sento.

In addition to these new trends in the business of making and distributing films, audience tastes shifted over the course of the decade. Traditional genre films, such as samurai swashbucklers and *yakuza* action pictures, declined in popularity, while formula series, which had once accounted for a high proportion of commercial product, dwindled in number. Even the few survivors, such as the *Tsuri Baka Nisshi* (Free And Easy) series, tended to find more success in video shops or on television than in the theaters.

While the mainstream was growing ever more sclerotic, young directors from the worlds of advertising, television and music videos were bringing a new vitality to Japanese films, though they weren't always welcomed by the industry establishment.

Among them were Shunji Iwai, whose work was informed by everything from girls' comics to MTV, and Hirokazu Koreeda, a TV documentarian whose films used documentary methods to explore central humanistic concerns, including the role of memory and the meaning of death. Many younger filmmakers followed Iwai and Koreeda in moving toward a more contemporary and personal cinema. A series of films featuring young rebels and others on the social margins poured forth from under-forty directors, while relatively few chose to explore Japan's past or issues affecting the larger society.

One corollary to this trend was the fascination, among older and younger directors alike, with Asians and other minorities. Although some of the films based on the theme of the alien other were straight exploitation vehicles designed to jerk tears or stir outrage, many filmmakers took a more nuanced and balanced perspective—and in the process made some of the more noteworthy films of the decade.

Ironically, during this period advancement to the upper echelons of the film industry by women, gays, and other members of formerly excluded groups was spotty and slow. Several younger women directors made their feature debuts, including Naomi Sento with the 1997 Cannes Camera d'Or winner *Moe no Suzaku* (Suzaku) but their impact was small. Also, gay-themed films by openly gay directors enjoyed a brief vogue in the early 1990s, but, once the vogue ended, the gay presence in films again became marginal.

Several directors from ethnic minorities had success with films set in their communities, most notably ethnic Korean Yoichi Sai with the 1993 hit comedy *Tsuki wa Dotchi ni Deteiru* (All Under the Moon) but Sai had little interest in further exploiting his background. Likewise, younger Okinawan directors made several films about Okinawan life in early years of the decade, but a distinct Okinawan cinema was slow to emerge.

Even so, this injection of new blood and new influences has had a significant impact on the direction of Japanese cinema. Even Yoji Yamada, that most mainstream, if populist, of directors, introduced minority characters into his films, while animator Hayao Miyazaki took his heroes for *Mononoke Hime* (Princess Mononoke)—an eco-fable set in medieval Japan that became the most popular Japanese film of all time—from members of marginalized groups, including aborigines, prostitutes, and lepers.

Meanwhile, young indie filmmakers have been moving to the center of the industry. One is Hideo Nakata, who made his debut with a film for Wowow's J Movie War series, but went on to direct *Ring* (1998) and *Ring 2* (1999), linked psycho-horror films that hit with audiences both in Japan and abroad. Another is Katsuyuki Motohiro, a TV director who made the jump to feature filmmaking with *Odoru Daisosasen* (Bayside Shakedown) a comic police drama that became the highest-earning Japanese film of 1998.

Also, instead of adapting to mainstream filmmaking conventions, these younger directors have imported innovations from other media. *Odoru Daisosasen* may be television writ large, with plenty of tube-ready mugging and Hollywood-inspired pastiche, but it also has a visual excitement and narrative drive that lifts it above the common run of commercial cinema.

The third question, I suppose, is whether the Japanese film industry has any future. Given the current dire situation of the other Asian film industries, notably Hong Kong's, why should Japan's fate be any different? Despite various downward trends, my feeling is that in ten years Japanese movies will still be very much around, just as Japanese television programs and pop music will still be around.

Japan is a highly sophisticated, largely inward-looking society with a large population and an oversized appetite for entertainment. For all their surface Westernization, Japa-

nese audiences usually prefer most of that entertainment to be Japanese. Kids here would rather see familiar animated faces in the theater than the latest Disney, while older folks would rather watch samurai swashbucklers than British costume dramas. Little of that is going to change.

The core young adult audience, however, likes the way Hollywood puts all those dollars on the screen in the form of effects and explosions. They are also lured by the glamour of the Hollywood product. There is no real local equivalent to Leonardo DiCaprio. But they are also willing to turn out for Japanese films that possess the Hollywood qualities they find attractive, while addressing purely local concerns, as the success of *Odoru Daisosasen* so abundantly proved. If the young filmmakers coming into the industry from outside can make more such films—and there little reason to believe they can't—the audience will be there. Also, even if the Masayuki Suo and Takeshi Kitanos are poached by Hollywood, there will be more to take their place. The talent pool here is broader, if not necessarily much deeper, than Hong Kong's.

The fourth and last question might be why I wrote and organized this book the way I did. Nearly all books about Japanese films, or Asian films for that matter, are written by either scholars or enthusiasts. As a working film journalist and a reviewer for an English-language newspaper, I am properly neither. Instead of graduate students or Miyazaki animation fans, I write mainly for industry professionals and general readers with an interest in film. The book is intended principally for this wider readership—thus the use of Western order for Japanese names, thus the exclusion of most jargon, academic or otherwise.

I have included as many of my *Japan Times* reviews as possible, knowing that many of the films are not yet available abroad. Why bother? In the hope that I might be able to open up the pipeline—still far too narrow—by which news of Japanese films reach the West. Someone may read these reviews, realize that Jun Ichikawa is a criminally neglected director, and organize a retrospective for him at a major festival. I have other dreams, but let this one serve as an example.

In the review section I have indicated my favorites of the decade with a star. The range is wide, from world-renowned festival winners to obscure video titles, from high art to genre entertainment. Some are in the syllabi of every course on Japanese film, while others languish in obscurity. I hope that with this book I can rescue a few of the latter.

I would like to thank Yoshie Yamaguchi of the *Japan Times* and the late Oscar Moore of *Screen International*, who first gave me the chance to write about Japanese films. I also thank Donald Richie, whose words of encouragement and advice have been a much-appreciated support over the years, and my editors at Weatherhill, Jeff Hunter and David Noble, who have been unfailingly patient and professional with a writer who is at times neither. Finally, I would like thank my wife, Yuko, for putting up with the long hours I have devoted to this project—hours I might have otherwise spent watching movies.

Notes on Nomenclature

I have tried, as much as possible, to make this book accessible to readers with a limited knowledge of Japan and the Japanese film industry. In rendering the titles of Japanese films and other genres such as TV shows and popular songs, I have left the many English words sprinkled about in them in their English spellings: thus *Perfect Blue*, not

Paafekuto Buruu. Translations of titles normally follow the Japanese title, except when the title is an English loanword, such as *Love Letter*, or a Japanese name (personal or geographic). When there is an “official” English title (given by the filmmaker or distributor) I have used it, even if it does not reflect the Japanese title very accurately; otherwise, titles are translated literally. Japanese words that may not be familiar to Western readers are set in italic. Japanese personal names are given in the Western order, i.e., given name first, followed by the family name.

The following terms may unfamiliar, but I have used them frequently for the sake of both concision and accuracy, and so offer definitions here:

Film rentals Instead of box office gross (the total amount the public pays exhibitors to see a given film), the text makes frequent reference to film rentals, which are the share of the film’s box-office earnings the exhibitor pays to the distributor. This is the preferred measure of box-office success in Japan, normally roughly equivalent to half the film’s gross.

Manga Usually translated as “Japanese comic books,” *manga* are far more various in content than comic books in the West, appealing to everyone from tots to middle-aged businessmen. They are quite different stylistically as well, relying more on cinematic scene-setting and atmospherics.

Anime A Janglish rendering of “animation,” *anime* has also become a distinctly different popular art form in Japan. They tend to have a narrower range of themes than *manga*, with SF or fantasy predominating, and are aimed at a narrower audience segment, mainly teenage and young adult males. Accordingly, sex and violence in all their variegated forms are far more common than in mainstream Western animation.

Salaryman Often translated as “businessman” or “white-collar office worker,” the salaryman has become, in the popular mind, an Everyman who regards his company as a surrogate family (or samurai clan) that he must serve loyally, while knowing that his job is the closest capitalism will ever come to a lifetime sinecure.

OL A Janglish abbreviation for “office lady,” the OL is often defined as a “female office clerk.” In addition to the usual clerical chores, young OLs at many companies clean desks, make tea, and otherwise serve as handmaidens to their male superiors. In recent years, however, popular representations of OLs have tended to depict them as assertive and even sassy with their male colleagues, using their youth and sex to compensate for their lack of power.

Otaku Often translated as “geek,” an *otaku* is commonly viewed as a seriously obsessed, socially inept expert on subjects that mainstream culture considers trivial or obscure, from the history of sumo wrestling to the films of Yuzo Kayama.

Yakuza Japanese gangsters, with a real-life tradition that stretches well back into Japan’s premodern past, and a tradition on stage and then screen that has been just as durable. *Yakuza* movies have been as prominent and popular a genre category in Japan as Mafia movies have been in Hollywood.

Essays