



DIRECTORY OF
**WORLD
CINEMA**

JAPAN



EDITED BY JOHN BERRA

DIRECTORY OF

**WORLD
CINEMA**

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Volume 1

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intellect Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

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This first edition of the *Directory of World Cinema: Japan* is the result of the commitment of a range of contributors from the fields of academia and film journalism. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this volume as, although the backgrounds and approaches of the writers who have submitted essays and reviews are quite diverse, their collective enthusiasm for the project has yielded an informed and insightful analysis of a fascinating national cinema. This volume was never intended to be a conventional film guide, as the overall aim was always to discuss Japanese cultural life and history as expressed through the medium of film. As such, I am most grateful to all of the contributors for embracing this brief and fully engaging with Japanese cinema through their preferred method of analysis, whether it be social-political, aesthetic, or genre-based. Through their discussions of such genres as Anime, Monster Movies, Samurai, Yakuza, Pink Films and the Contemporary Blockbuster, they have endeavoured to engage with students, senior academics, and film enthusiasts, and it has been a pleasure to work with each contributor in an editorial capacity.

I would also like to thank the team at Intellect, particularly Masoud Yazdani and May Yao, who have supported this volume through its various stages, making it a truly collaborative process. The commitment which Intellect is making towards the field of Film Studies is exemplified by this Directory, and will continue with other volumes in the *Directory of World Cinema* series. The *Directory of World Cinema: Japan* would also not have been possible without the assistance of David Desser, who was instrumental in bringing together many of contributors to this edition, and the critical network of the Toronto J-Film Pow-Wow, an online community which is dedicated to furthering the discussion of Japanese cinema in the West. A publication with the depth and scope of the *Directory of World Cinema: Japan* cannot come to fruition without such support, and your assistance is greatly appreciated.

John Berra

INTRODUCTION

BY THE EDITOR

The films that have emerged from Japan, from the silent period, to the post-war era, and the present day, represent a historically and culturally important national cinema; this is a cinema that has undergone fascinating transitions as it has responded to shifting political climates, the needs of the domestic audience, and the artistic ambitions of auteur directors. It has been suggested by Gerow in the *Encyclopaedia of Japanese Culture* (Buckley 2009) that the Japanese film industry has consciously modelled itself on Hollywood, with the formation of major studios and a reliance on particular genres and narrative forms, most obviously samurai, yakuza and monster movies, and the development of 'star' identities. However, the post-war Japanese film industry has also been director-orientated, which has allowed auteur filmmakers to develop their distinctive cinematic sensibilities both within the mainstream and on its margins; this has resulted in distinctive bodies of work which effortlessly blend the commercial with the personal, providing rich cultural and social-political insight, whilst also satisfying and subverting audience expectations both nationally and internationally.

Between 1950 and 1958, Japan was producing the largest number of films in the world but, as with its American model, it began to lose audiences due to the advent of television and the rejection of studio-sanctioned cinema by the all-important youth market. The industrial revolution that followed, which resulted in the advent of the Japanese New Wave, independent production, and the emergence of auteur filmmakers who were able to reach the youth audience with their volatile cinematic excursions into the underbelly of contemporary Japanese society, gave rise to a greater diversity in Japanese cinema. This sudden shift provided audiences with films that were experimental and politically-charged alongside more traditional entertainment that revelled in the rich history of the nation, whilst also commenting on modernity through the distance of the period piece. While the cinema of Japan is often appreciated for its aesthetics, with the expertly-staged widescreen-action of Akira Kurosawa and the familial intimacy of Yasujiro Ozu providing two contrasting but equally appropriate examples, it has also chronicled the turbulent history of the nation: the Heian and Edo periods have often served as the backdrop for historical drama, while the positive and negative aspects of the Occupation of Japan and its much-discussed 'bubble economy' have been acutely explored within established genre templates,

Whilst researching the subject of Contemporary World Cinema I had the pleasure of interviewing John Williams, a Welshman who is firmly established in the Japanese film industry since forming his production company 100 Metre Films, through which he has written and directed two fine films in the Japanese language, *Firefly Dreams* (2001) and *Starfish Hotel* (2006). He explained that, upon returning to the UK, he was disappointed to discover that the DVD racks of British retailers only featured titles by specific directors, such as Takeshi Kitano and Takashi Miike, who have been aggressively marketed to overseas audiences due to the 'extreme' nature of their work and that other aspects of Japanese Cinema

have been somewhat neglected by global distributors. He also expressed frustration that 'the sexually explicit Japanese cinema that is better known in the West is a very marginal cinema in Japan', and that 'most of what I personally think is the great Japanese cinema of the last ten years has not made it to the UK or even outside Japan at all.' Williams concedes that such distribution issues are a 'market reality', and while this volume also acknowledges that reality by featuring a number of popular titles that are widely accessible outside Japan, it also attempts to readdress the balance by featuring a wide range of films and film-makers from Japan's cinematic past and present.

In the West, the cinema of Japan has recently been associated with cinematic strangeness and extremity, largely due to the J-Horror boom, which is now in decline in the domestic market and has also reached a plateau in the UK and elsewhere, largely due to the demise of the distributor Tartan and its 'Asia Extreme' label. The international success, particularly through the lucrative DVD market, of titles such as *Ring* (1998) and *Dark Water* (2002), both directed by Hideo Nakata, and Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999), not to mention Kinji Fukasaku's controversial cinematic swansong *Battle Royale* (2000), have brought contemporary Japanese cinema to an enthusiastic audience that is receptive to innovative genre fare, regardless of its country of origin. However, the popularity – and notoriety – of these films have somewhat obscured both the burgeoning independent sector of contemporary Japanese cinema and its legacy. Such excellent academic publications as Philips and Stringer's (2006) *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, Nolletti and Desser's (2005) *Reframing Japanese Cinema*, and Ritchie's extensive work on the subject, which includes such texts as *Japanese Cinema: An Introduction* (1990) and *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* (1972), have played a vital role in emphasizing the cinematic identity of Japan, and ensuring that such important auteurs as Kenji Mizoguchi, Kon Ichikawa and Shohei Imamura and have not been neglected due to the popular trends and marketing hooks which often 'reinvent' national cinema, altering perceptions of style and content in pursuit of short-term economic gain.

As with the other volumes in the *Directory of World Cinema* series, the *Directory of World Cinema: Japan* is intended to be informative rather than exhaustive. Instead of providing a general overview of Japanese Cinema, past and present, through a conventional A–Z structure, this volume aims to offer readers both familiar and unfamiliar with this particular national cinema a more culturally-specific insight into the films that have emerged from Japan. Reviews are organized by genre or cinematic movement, each section opening with an introductory essay, which aims to provide cultural and industrial context. Other sections include Industry Spotlight, which focuses on the Art Theatre Guild; a Festival Focus on the annual Nippon Connection event; and Cultural Crossover, which explores the links between Japanese Art and Japanese Cinema. The section on Directors provides the opportunity for more detailed discussion of three fascinating film-makers: Akira Kurosawa, Takeshi Kitano, and Satoshi Kon, with their oeuvres being analysed in relation to their production methodology, thematic concerns, and cinematic legacies. It is hoped that, by focusing on a range of significant genres and allowing contributors to adopt their preferred analytical approaches (aesthetic, industrial, social-political, transnational), the *Directory of World Cinema: Japan* provides a unique insight into 'Japaneseness' through the medium of film, and its national evolution as a mode of industrial and cultural production.

John Berra



Akiresu to Kame, 2008. Produced by Bandai/Wowow

FILM OF THE YEAR **ACHILLES AND THE TORTOISE**

Achilles and the Tortoise

Akiresu to kame

Studio

Bandai Visual Company, Office
Kitano

Director

Takeshi Kitano

Producer

Masayuki Mori, Takio Yoshida

Screenwriter

Takeshi Kitano

Cinematographer

Katsumi Yanagishima

Synopsis

Machisu is an introverted child, immersed in his own world of painting. His father is a wealthy industrialist who believes he is a connoisseur of the arts and has also acted as a patron, sponsoring local artists to study in Paris and find their own style. Indulged, due to his father's money and influence, Machisu has no shortage of art supplies and is able to walk out of a maths lesson to paint instead, or hold up traffic so that he can sketch the vehicles, but his creative comfort comes to an abrupt end when his father's business collapses overnight and his parents commit suicide. He briefly resides with his poor Uncle, who has always resented his brother for not spreading his wealth, but Machisu's ambitions are out of place in this lower-class household and he is soon packed off to the orphanage to which his father once donated money. In his early twenties, Machisu takes on various menial jobs to pay the fees for art school and, while doing so, meets Sachiko, one of the few people who will ever understand his art, and marries her. The naïve Machisu attempts to impress a local art dealer with his paintings but always leaves the gallery disappointed, although the dealer does sell some of his work behind his back. In his later years, Machisu relies on his wife and teenage daughter for financial support but eventually alienates those around him. When his daughter dies and his wife insists on a separation, Machisu's art becomes altogether darker and ultimately self-destructive.

Composers

Yuki Kajiura

Editor

Takeshi Kitano

Duration

199 minutes

CastTakeshi Kitano, Kanako Higuchi,
Kumiko Aso, Nao Omori**Year**

2008

Critique

It is possible to view Takeshi Kitano's *Achilles and the Tortoise* as the final instalment of a swiftly-realized, semi-autobiographical trilogy about the nature of the artist, as it follows *Takeshis'* (2005) and *Glory to the Filmmaker* (2007). However, *Achilles and the Tortoise* is less self-reflexive than those films, not nearly as divisive, and ultimately more involving in that it revolves around Kitano's great passion – painting – as opposed to his public persona. Kitano's enthusiasm for art has been widely documented, with painterly touches featuring in such films as *Hana-Bi* (1997) and *Dolls* (2002), but the character of Machisu, who Kitano portrays in the final section, is certainly not a self-portrait. Whereas the writer-director-actor-comedian-artist has found success in a variety of fields and guises, and often united multiple facets of his persona within his filmic oeuvre, Machisu repeatedly fails as an artist, rejected by the local art dealer and, eventually, by his own family. The paintings featured in the film are all by Kitano himself but they were obviously created 'in character', with their overt references to modern art reflecting the fact that Machisu is as derivative as he is compulsive.

Although this a more formal work than *Takeshis'* or *Glory to the Filmmaker*, Kitano's absurdist humour is still evident, often suggesting that art can be a tragic folly for those who are not destined for commercial success with a series of throwaway jokes at the expense of the pretentious art students that Machisu falls in with during his college years. In one scene, they try crashing into a wall in order to dramatically spill paint. Initial efforts, achieved by a student riding into the wall on a bicycle, generate striking results but when another student drives his car into the wall, he ends up killing himself. In later life, Machisu's attempt to enter into a state of 'craziness', in order to produce art that is more shocking, almost results in his death as he submerges himself in bath water and asks his wife to hold him under. This only results in Machisu being rushed to the emergency room and his wife being briefly taken into custody, as the police officers who arrive on the scene assume that she has tried to 'murder' her partner by drowning him. Yet beneath the black humour there is also an unflinching honesty to the film, shown through the character of Machisu's daughter, a frustrated teenager who leaves home and becomes a prostitute, later scheduling a brief meeting with her father around a rendezvous with a 'client'. When his daughter dies, Kitano and his now-estranged wife identify the body in the morgue, but what should be a moment of reconciliation at a time of grief becomes a disturbing insight into the depth of Machisu's obsession with art: he takes his wife's lipstick and draws on his daughter's dead body, treating her corpse as an art project. His wife understandably breaks down and leaves in disgust.

As both an artist and a human being, Machisu never really develops and seems to exist in a perpetual state of arrested development. Indulged at a young age, largely due to his father's wealth and prominence in the local community, he stubbornly refuses to accept that there may be things in life more important than art and the pursuit of his dreams. Even experiences which should burst his self-involved bubble, such as living with his working-class uncle, or undertaking menial jobs as a delivery boy or factory machinist, do little for his character and it is only in his later years, when his daughter dies and

his wife leaves him, that he begins to consider the ramifications of his devotion to his work. However, even his depression and grief are channelled into the creation of more extreme pieces rather than a re-evaluation of his principles, continuing to paint even when he is caught in a fire.

As an artist, he 'peaks' during childhood and never really evolves, partly because he is 'encouraged' to study other styles as a means of catering to the market for wealthy 'connoisseurs' like his late father, losing any originality by working systematically through the approaches and methods of the most celebrated 'names' in modern art. The early praise he receives is not due to the quality of his work but because nobody dares to offend his father, although unscrupulous dealers are happy to ridicule his lack of taste behind his back. Machisu's main failing as an artist is his desire to sell and his over-eagerness to adopt the style of others as a means of achieving commercial viability. An animated prologue sequence illustrates the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea's motion paradox of Achilles failing to overtake a tortoise because every time Achilles reaches a certain point, the tortoise has already moved on. Machisu embraces style after style on the insistence of the local art dealer, but always finds that he is a step behind the ever-evolving art world and shifting tastes. A painting that he had produced years earlier does eventually sell, albeit to a commercial enterprise rather than a serious collector, and is seen hanging on the wall of the bar where Machisu meets his estranged daughter to borrow money for art supplies.

The finale, with Machisu released from hospital and reunited with his Sachiko, may seem convenient as the stubborn artist, who has failed to rise above the status of 'amateur', belatedly realizes that 'success' does not always equal 'love' and chooses the latter over the former. Yet he only does this after a final, futile attempt to sell a piece of 'found art', a burnt soda can which he has retrieved from the wreckage of the fire. With its vicious portrayal of gallery owners and agents, *Achilles and the Tortoise* finds Kitano venting his frustration with the hypocrisy of the art world while also questioning the place of art in contemporary society, but it is also an affecting story of a 'misunderstood' artist who all too easily loses what should have been his signature style through critical misdirection.

John Berra



FESTIVAL FOCUS

NIPPON CONNECTION

Nippon Connection is, as of 2009, the largest annual showcase in the world for films from Japan. Staged in April of every year in Frankfurt, Germany, it shows a cross-section of almost the entire audio-visual production of the Japanese media industry. Showcasing around 150 films over five days to an audience of over 16,000, it features a large number of German, European, international and even world premiere screenings. Every year, 30–40 film-makers from Japan attend Nippon Connection in Frankfurt to introduce their films, with past guests including the likes of Shinya Tsukamoto, Ryūichi Hiroki, Kaori Momoi, Toshiaki Toyoda and Koji Wakamatsu. The 2009 festival featured guests such as directors Kazuyoshi Kumakiri, Yuki Tanada, and Ryuichi Honda, anime director Tatsuyuki Tanaka, and Yukie Kito, the producer of the award-winning *Tokyo Sonata* (2008). Aside from its enviable range of screenings, the Frankfurt festival is supplemented by a large number of lectures, exhibitions, workshops, and performances.

Nippon Connection has grown considerably since its inception in the year 2000, when 13 films were screened and two guest film-makers attended, including a young Nobuhiro Yamashita. This expansion coincided with an explosive growth of Japanese feature film production and its increasing success in the international market. Nippon Connection was originally founded by then-students of Theatre, Film and Media from the Goethe University of Frankfurt. With Japanese cinema experiencing a critical resurgence in the late 1990s, such films were, at the time, primarily and very selectively screened at venues such as the Rotterdam International Film Festival or the Cannes Film Festival. The 2000 Nippon Connection Festival was originally conceived as a one-off event but audience attendance was four times the initial expectation, despite the usually lacklustre commercial performance of films from Japan when released in German cinemas. The obvious interest in Japanese film led to the re-conception of the festival as an annually-staged European event on a larger scale. Nippon Connection's considerable success can conceivably be attributed to increased production in Japan, a growing general interest in Japanese popular culture, innovative programming, and the burgeoning of the economy that has led to overall growth and multiplication of film festivals since the early 1980s.

In its present form, the festival consists of four sections. Nippon Cinema shows 35mm productions ranging from every genre and budget level of theatrical releases in Japan. Nippon Digital focuses on a somewhat wider range of predominantly digitally-produced works that include experimental or student films, as well as specials focusing on directors or production initiatives, music videos or commercial feature film productions. By assembling films often difficult to see even for residents of Japan, the Nippon Digital section of the event has developed a reputation as a hunting ground for young talent amongst international critics and programmers. Nippon Retro features an annually-changing retrospective that focuses variably on directors, genres, or other themes. Finally, the Nippon Culture section stages a large variety of additional events that include art exhibitions, lectures, podium discussions, workshops and performances. Nippon Connection 2009 devoted a special focus to the role of women in the Japanese film industry, with a podium discussion on the topic, lectures on gender issues, and special programmes such as *Peaches!* to look specifically at female directors. Often, artists are invited from Japan, and contribute contemporary re-imaginings of film-related arts such as Kami-shibai (paper theatre) and combinations of dance or live-music with film screenings.

Possibly due to its roots in academia, Nippon Connection's programme visibly engages with conceptual problems that accompany the staging of a festival focused exclusively on films produced within a single film industry perceived in a national



framework. These problems become pronounced when the national framework in question is Japan: a country whose national identity has been constructed, both in- and outside of Japan, along the lines of a particularly stubborn cultural essentialism. The tropes of exceptionalism and Japanese uniqueness are easily appropriated by nationalism, and the question remains of how a festival showing films from Japan can complicate such cultural mechanisms. These concerns have, to a certain degree, been exacerbated by the recent interest of the Japanese government in utilizing popular culture as a means for accumulating both economic and political capital through a national brand characterized by 'Japan cool'.

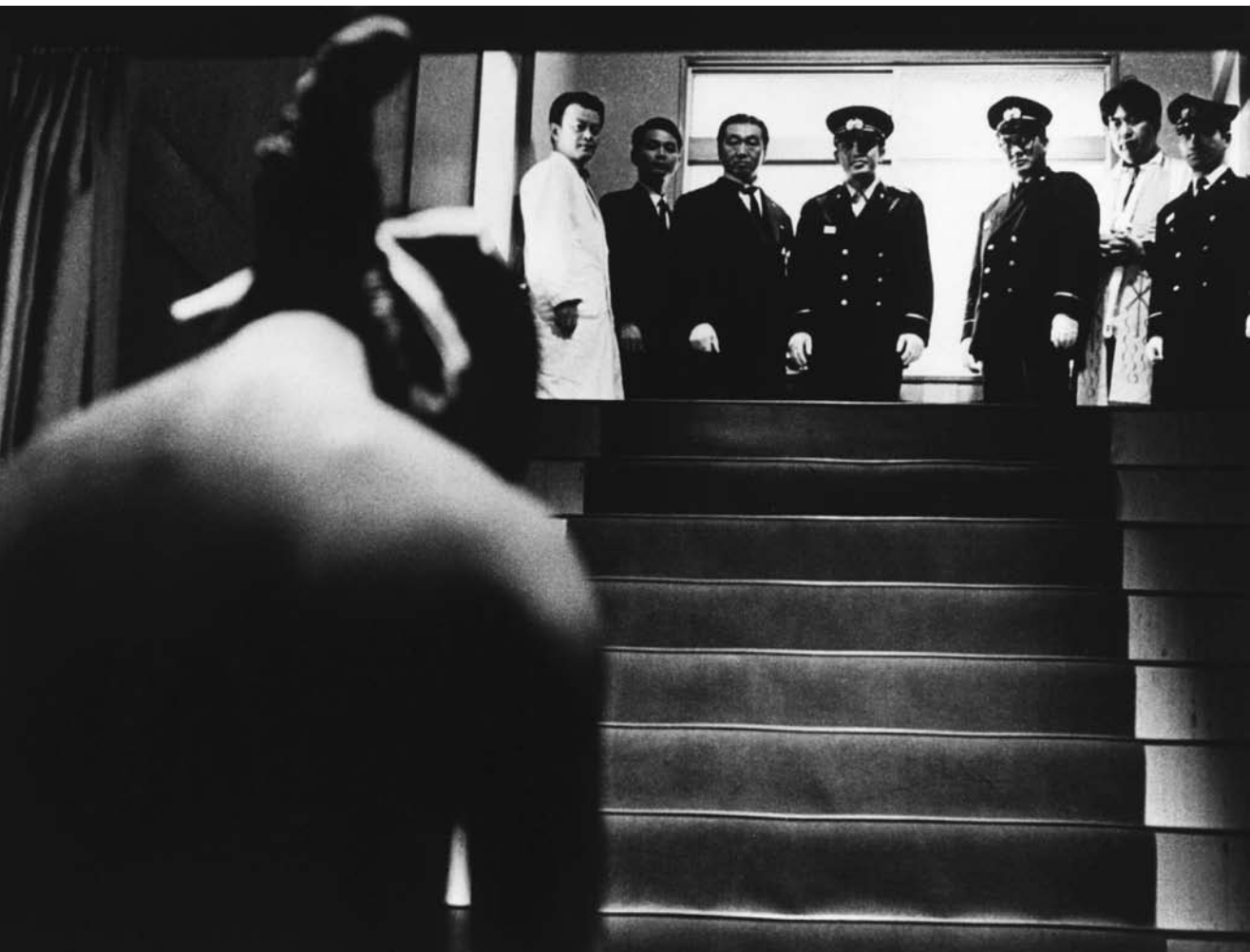
The spectrum of the film selection is thus very broad in an attempt to avoid any possibility of isolating a 'national spirit', instead focusing on the high degree of diversity within the Japanese film industry. Screenings of low-budget films from less-respected popular genres, such as V-Cinema and Pink Film, occur alongside internationally-recognized arthouse films and commercial blockbusters and encourage the rearranging of canon and complicate the construction of a coherent model of film from Japan. The 2009 festival devoted an entire retrospective to pink film, with 78-year old pink film veteran Mamoru Watanabe in attendance, and his presence was accompanied by various lectures and talk events to put this idiosyncratic genre in perspective. Events involving what is labelled as 'traditional' or 'hyper-modern' Japanese culture are, according to the organizers, meant to attract a wider audience that will inevitably have more experience with stereotypical depictions. Attendees are also prompted to spend additional time at the festival centre between screenings, and to see films that counter these very expectancies. Thus, the three-storey festival centre, with its two theatres and large number of events in various spaces of the building, is meant to invite a multitude of experiences.



Side projects further engage the questions of confluence and exchange. From 2003, the Exchanging Tracks project provided composers from all genres and from all over Europe with recordings of urban sounds from Japan as touchstones for new compositions. The resultant musical pieces were then handed over to directors in Japan, who used them to shoot short films which were then screened at the festival in the presence of both the composers and the film-makers. In 2007, the Kinema Club Conference, one of the most important regularly-held international conferences on film and moving images from Japan, was co-hosted by Nippon Connection. In 2009, Nippon Connection featured a 'virtual bar' that connected the bar area at Nippon Connection with a bar in the Shinjuku quarter of Tokyo via video chat. This enabled the audience to interact and share drinks with film-makers assembled at the Tokyo bar whose films had been screened in Frankfurt on the respective day.

The 2009 Nippon Connection once again featured so many sold-out screenings that it is clear that the festival will need to expand beyond the current four screening venues if it wants to increase audience attendance. The 2009 programme assembled the usual broad array of films, ranging from Sion Sono's sensational *Love Exposure* (2008) to indie-animation collective *Animation Soup* and a selection of the best films from the 2009 edition of the legendary Yubari Fantastic Film Festival, while the winner of the audience award for Best Film in the Nippon Cinema section was Toshio Lee's *Detroit Metal City* (2008). A segment of the programme, under the banner of Nippon Connection on Tour, will be screened at various film festivals and arthouse cinema chains in Europe and North and South America, the Barcelona Asian Film Festival and the New York Asian Film Festival among them, making the highlights of the event accessible to appreciative audiences worldwide.

Alexander Zahlten



Death By Hanging, 1968. Produced by Sozo-Sha

INDUSTRY SPOTLIGHT **THE ART THEATRE GUILD**

1961 saw the birth of the Art Theatre Guild, an independent association dedicated to exploring the artistic possibilities of cinema. ATG quickly achieved its place in film history as the most important producer and distributor of independent films in Japan; their activities led the art cinema scene for many years. As an alternative to the commercial studio products available to the Japanese public, ATG promoted an environment where viewers could immerse themselves in foreign art cinema, and where artists could engage in independent film-making. ATG and their cinemas became the central hub for creativity in the field of the moving image, a meeting point for the nexus of artistic ideas, uniting the network of heterogeneous voices of Japan's underground cinema scene.

Titans of Japanese cinema, such as Nagisa Oshima, Kaneto Shindo, Yasuzo Masumura, Kon Ichikawa, Shohei Imamura, as well as lesser-known artists including Masahiro Shinoda, Hani Susumu, Yoshida Yoshishige and Toshio Matsumoto, were all, for one reason or another, drawn to the institution and were provided with a platform for individual expression uninhibited by commercial constraints. ATG's artistic integrity and flexibility generated a canon of work that resonated with expressive energy and an eagerness to experiment; their corpus perhaps unparalleled in the rest of the world. An attempt to assemble the commonalities within their work meets with complications as their *modus operandi* entailed individual autonomy, diversity and artistic experimentation. Nevertheless, when we frame the Art Theatre Guild within a socio-historical context, we are provided with a fascinating perspective on the shifting mechanisms of Japanese culture and society, its film history, and a gripping record of the artistic blossoming of many of Japan's key directors.

ATG was first established as a distributor for foreign arthouse films with a commitment to screening a variety of serious art films from around the globe, at this point scarcely available to the general public. Regulation in currency and quota systems on imports meant that local distributors avoided art films, which were unable to guarantee financial revenue. To prevent such a deficiency in the cinema scene, the Art Theatre Guild of Japan was launched in November 1961 with the opening of ten art cinemas across the country. Their programmes were launched in April 1962 with *Mother Joan of the Angels* (Kawalerowicz, 1961) at the Shinjuku Bunka, the main cinema of the ATG chain located on the east side of Shinjuku, which was to become the heart of artistic and political events in Tokyo over the decade. Programming decisions were made by a committee including Japanese film critics, film-makers and Kashiko Kawakita, one of the initiators of the ATG project and a key figure in the cross-pollination of films between Europe and Japan, alongside her husband, Nagamasa, who had founded Towa Trading Company. Devoted to showcasing an array of foreign productions, the films were chosen for their engagement with cinema as an artistic medium. As well as classics never publicly screened before in Japan, including the likes of *Citizen Kane* and *Battleship Potemkin*, ATG distributed films from contemporaries around the world. ATG emerged at an exciting period in film history, where a burst of creativity simultaneously erupted onto the cinematic plateau. Their programme primarily incorporated the New Wave films from Europe, but India's Satyajit Ray, Brazil's Glauber Rocha, and Japanese independents such as Hiroshi Teshigahara also had their work distributed around Japan. ATG established an artistically pensive environment for their audience, with films being screened for at least a month to allow multiple viewings, and their choice of films successfully generated an enthusiasm for international film and advocated an investigation of film history.

Nevertheless, by the late 60s the Art Theatre Guild encountered difficulties when some of their cinemas around the country dropped out of the project,

perhaps due to inevitable financial difficulties. In Tokyo, other cinemas recognized the public's interest in foreign art cinema, consequently restricting ATG's selection of films. Furthermore, the government withdrew the quota regulations and relaxed rules on the importation of foreign films and, accordingly, distribution fees for imported films escalated. Amidst these shifting patterns of economic interaction, ATG's aspirations were revitalized in the formation of a production unit. As Kuzui Kinshiro, the manager of the Shinjuku Bunka and a key producer of ATG admitted, '[o]ne could say that, in a way, I benefited from the misfortunes of others'. Young film-makers of the major studios, including Oshima, Shinoda and Yoshida of Shochiku, encountering increasing frustration with the artistic restrictions of their companies, had left their studio occupations to pursue independence. These studio rejects were in search of a place to present their work, and many had been in contact with the cinemas of ATG. Screenings of Oshima's film *Yunbogi's Diary* and Yukio Mishima's *Patriotism* had frequently sold out at the cinemas, encouraging ATG to sponsor independent film-making in their own country. After testing the water by supporting Imamura's *A Man Vanishes* halfway through production in 1967, ATG initiated a plan for 10-million-yen films, where they would provide half the budget of 5 million, and the rest was to be assembled by the film-makers' own production units. Starting with Oshima's seminal film *Death by Hanging*, ATG became the motor that drove the Japanese independent cinema scene for the next thirty years.

Independent film-makers were to discover their perfect partnership with the Art Theatre Guild. Despite the constraints of moderate finance, the artists were given complete artistic autonomy, cinemas for their films to be screened in an appropriate environment, and the possibility of foreign exposure through Kawakita's relationship with film festivals in the West. The planning committee consisted of film critics and Kinshiro Kuzui, who advocated films with artistic energy. This support, along with the social unrest and heated political agitation of the late 1960s in Japan, provided the backdrop for an exciting period of artistic experimentation and political awakening in Japanese cinema. The prospect of the renewal of the Anpo US-Japan Security Treaty at the end of the decade enraged the Japanese public, and led to protests against the continual presence of the US army on Japanese soil. Zengakuren¹ demonstrations became a common occurrence amongst the streets of Shinjuku, which became a platform for interpenetration between art and politics. Student protesters and striving artists freely conversed in the Shinjuku Bunka, encouraging a productive dialogue between politics and art. Bombs exploded on the street where Shinjuku Bunka was located, and the police interrogated Kuzui about his friendship with politically-motivated film-makers-cum-activists like Masao Adachi and Koji Wakamatsu. It was in this environment where politics occupied the forefront of life that the spiral of discontent formed a springboard for the artists, from which ATG productions emerged and were at their prime.

The films of the Art Theatre Guild invigorated the Japanese cinema scene with a thematically and stylistically diverse range of films. Documentarists, studio rejects, TV directors, experimental film-makers, poets and artists were attracted by the prospect of artistic freedom that ATG offered. Projects were initiated for their originality, encouraging film-makers to propose ideas that intentionally subverted the artistic mores of cinema. Although the majority of the productions were original screenplays, theatrical adaptations were not uncommon, with films like *Double Suicide* (Shinoda, 1969) and *Shura* (Matsumoto, 1971) incorporating the aesthetics of traditional Japanese theatre to consciously deconstruct cinematic form. Formal innovation was also encouraged in the ATG and film-makers interrogated cinema as a medium, re-evaluating artistic certainties. The boundaries between reality and

fiction were frequently explored through the medium, often disruptively mediating between temporal spaces to generate an immersive experience of confusion and uncertainty. Productions quickly garnered prestige and crewmembers and actors offered to work for low costs, simply for the kudos of taking part. The films courageously tackled subject matter that was deemed socially and politically controversial, such as *Death by Hanging's* attack on state execution, and the portrayal of such themes were fearless. The films resonated with nihilistic energy and sprightly exuberance, exemplified in Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969), Oshima's *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1969) and Hani Susumu's *The Inferno of First Love* (1968). Shinjuku Bunka built an underground theatre which featured avant-garde plays by the likes of Yukio Mishima and screened 8mm and 16mm experimental films. It became a meeting point for a constellation of conceptions between the arts, formulating an interdisciplinary network of creativity, which was reflected in the artists' work with the ATG. With the support of the ATG, films like Oshima's *Boy* (1969) and *Ceremony* (1971), Terayama Shuji's *Throw Away the Books, Let's Go into the Streets* (1971), and Koji Wakamatsu's *Ecstasy of the Angels* (1971) emerged out this context and led the forefront of the art cinema scene in Japan.

Although the Art Theatre Guild continued to generate a diverse assortment of inventive cinema, by the mid-70s the films were increasingly geared towards the conventional. After 1972's *Asama Cottage Incident*, the turbulence of social unrest was no longer a focus of public interest and the radical spirit of the age ceased to exist. With the Shinjuku Bunka shut down in 1974, unable to sustain the high maintenance costs of the building, the New Wave films were no longer screened in such an artistically-interactive environment. ATG's insistence on original scripts was soon abandoned and, after the financial triumph of Yoichi Takabayashi's adaptation of Seishi Yokomizo's *Murder in Honjin Manor House*, a succession of literary adaptations followed. Iseki Taneo retired from his 17-year presidency at ATG to pass the baton to Shiro Sasaki, who ushered in a new era for the Art Theatre Guild. As the major studios curtailed their number of productions to regulate costs, newcomers found it increasingly hard to launch their careers. However, Sasaki's renewed dedication to support newcomers and those from pink cinema backgrounds provided opportunities within ATG. Although there were notable exceptions, these later films no longer demonstrated the impulsive drive and experimental edge that pervaded ATG's earlier productions. As studios continued to downsize their production, independency in film-making became the standard in Japan. Following Sasaki's departure in 1986, ATG activities came to a virtual standstill. After a little action with Shigeo Kusano as president, the cultural initiators have been inactive since the release of Kaneto Shindo's *The Strange Tale of Oyuki* in 1992.

Currently, with the vast majority of Japanese production and distribution organized by independents, and the increasing availability of foreign and local art-house cinema starting with the arrival of video in the 80s, then DVD, and possibly now with downloading, it could be said that ATG accomplished their goals and have no need to remain. Yet, the cinema scene today seems somewhat lacking in comparison; its motivation and energy unparalleled, the Art Theatre Guild is surely missed.²

Notes

1. Zengakuren are a socialist federation of university students.
2. Contextual information and ideas are heavily indebted to the inspiring work of Roland Domenig, Go Hirasawa, and Isolde Standish.

Julian Ross



CULTURAL CROSSOVER

ART AND FILM

The close relationship between image and text, or picture and narration, has a long history in Japanese art forms. The first example of this relationship is *emakimono* – narrative scrolls that offered the possibility of following a story in a combination of writing and painting – go back as early as the twelfth century. In certain cases, these were simply illustrated fiction novels, with the most popular being the *Genji monogatari emakimono* (Tales of Genji scroll, c.1130) and those could, to an extent, be compared with illuminated manuscripts. However, versions of storytelling in the form of unreeling images with not a single written word to accompany them were also made, the best known example of these being *Chochu Giga* (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals). These were sometimes used in *kamishibai* – picture-story shows, in which they would be presented to help stir the imagination of an audience.

This tradition was to continue in classical painting, often executed on sequential *byobu* panels and popular woodblock prints, where references to literary origins were made via the inclusion of pictures within the pictures in the form of *mitate* (most commonly translated as ‘parody’ but serving a function of allusion). A practice of illustrated albums where the eye was entertained by a continuous imagery of a similar subject was widespread in the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, with the most frequently-quoted example being Hokusai’s *Manga* series: 15 volumes of varied sketches published over a number of decades after 1814.

The playful spirit of the *Ukiyo-e* world was sometimes expressed in games involving *mawaritoro* – revolving lanterns, resulting in an effect similar to early phantasmagoria shows. Optical devices enabling different or enhanced perspectives were known from the eighteenth century onwards, imported via Holland, and included *oranda megane* (‘Dutch glasses’) and *nozoki-karakuri* (‘peeping automata’) box, early forms of entertainment that involved moving pictures. The text-image relationship together with existing interest in and knowledge of methods of image animation were to provide necessary foundation for the twentieth-century developments in crossovers between visual art and film.

The arrival of Western products of the mechanical age – photography and film – were welcomed with curiosity and a willingness for experimentation, with traditional aesthetics and classical theatre fertilizing the ground for their further growth on Japanese soil. At the turn of the century, the spirit of modernism was taking root in Japan with avant-garde artists grouping around *Mavo* magazine and various photography clubs informed by Surrealism, Constructivism and Futurism being established around the country. An active exchange of ideas with European artists and intellectuals and achievements in the visual domain helped bridge the gap between traditional Japanese and the post-war art, which was to embrace transnational heritage of cinematography as an equal visual reference.

The Neo-Dadaist movement that spread in Japan during the early 1960s created a background for experimental photographers, video and film artists, with Hosoe Eikoh, Tomatsu Shomei and Takahiko Imura playing significant roles. This atmosphere informed Nam June Paik while studying aesthetics at the Tokyo University and produced some of the best-known Japanese avant-garde directors.

Multi-media and conceptual movements springing out from the booming New York art scene are the most obvious starting point, and a basis for cross-referencing. Film and visual arts were quick to reach Japan and the first examples of their miscegenation should be looked for in this period. The work of Tadanori Yokoo, an active member of underground Tokyo circles, equally inspired by psychedelic and Pop Art as well as *Edo* period Japanese aesthetics, is particularly important in terms of art-film interaction. Marilyn Monroe and James Dean play as much a part in the visual vocabulary of his posters from the 1970s as the more traditional *Ukiyo-e* iconography. Yokoo not only explored innovative graphic design styles but also announced final inclusion of Japan into international art circles of the postmodern, globalized era.

Aside from more traditional means, in which cinematography and visual art were cross-influencing each other in terms of perspective and time-space representations, Western cinematography informing the work of Japanese visual artists added another layer in interpretation of this type of artworks. The tendency culminated in the 1990s in the oeuvre of Morimura Yasumasa and Shinji Ogawa. Within the domain of photography, Yasumasa's images from the series *M's Self-Portraits* (1993–2000), where he takes on the roles of female Hollywood actresses inspired by Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, are the best example of the further usage of film imagery in the visual art medium, as previously practiced by Yokoo. Yasumasa appropriated the Western film iconography as a setting of his work, openly quoting his source with a self-portrait as Cindy herself (*To my little sister: Cindy Sherman*, 1998). These are explorations into issues of identity, with the moving image becoming a database of its still counterpart, so photography across different continents was an appropriate vehicle for Yasumasa's cross-cultural, cross-medium and cross-gender experiments. In addition, Shinji Ogawa's *Without You* series, in which he renders still shots from Hollywood movies in oil using photorealistic methodology in order to deploy them on canvas, furthers the question of not only the globalization of the filmic iconography and the ways it is used in the dialogue of different artistic media but the perception of reality and how it becomes signified in the visual domain.

The twentieth-century medium that got closest to bringing together visual art and film, however, is video. When discussing the Japanese scene, Mori Mariko is possibly the most apparent representative of this merger. Although her work continued to grow from the initial *Birth of Star* series (1995) towards internationally-acclaimed videos such as *Miko no inori* ('The Shaman's Prayer', 1996) and more demanding installation pieces, especially upon her move to New York, performance and fantasy continued to play a large part. In the construction of a fictional narrative presented in video format, she can be considered similar to another Japanese artist of the medium – Shimabuku. Most recently, Hiraki Sawa practices a particularly filmic style, constructing both miniature settings and narratives for his 'moving collages'.

A component that cannot be omitted in whatever is said about contemporary art in Japan is animation, as its omnipresence in Japanese culture makes it relevant in any discourse, especially the one on cinema. There are a number of artists of the younger generation who use animation as the medium of their expression and Ayako Tabata, aka Tabaimo, and her installation pieces based on

animated hand drawings are probably the finest example. With a general tone that is reminiscent of traditional Japan, drawing on classic *Ukiyo-e* iconography (*Japanese Bathhouse*, 2000) she is demonstrating the latest achievements of multi-media and is equally recognized in Japan and on the international stage. Animation is maybe the most interesting medium when thinking about different crossovers between cinema and art – in Panofsky's sense that 'comic strip is the most important root of cinema' – as there are a number of cross-pollinations in Japanese context that can be looked at.

The process, which combines visual narration of *emakimono* as an origin of manga comics and anime films with cinematic technology, goes back to becoming a formal art form outside of its studio production, with production stills being considered works of art in themselves. Because most of the animated productions have become computer-generated during the 1990s, animation cels as original artworks are now established as the latest collectibles, with those from Studio Ghibli being on special demand. However, classical *Ukiyo-e* iconography continues to be a recurrent visual reference in the work of contemporary Japanese artists, and, as such, has found its way to the film as well – through *Ukiyo-e projections*, series of photographs by Eikoh Hosoe made in 2002 most notably to the 2006 film *Sakuran* directed by the photographer Mika Ninagawa.

Examples of visual art inspiring the work of film directors include some of the Japan's most prolific authors, such as Akira Kurosawa and Takeshi Kitano. Kurosawa is known to have failed an entrance exam to art school, thus abandoning early aspirations of becoming a painter. His passion for visual art was to manifest in frequent visits to gallery spaces and the talent he had is obviously expressed in the sketches he made for his films, *Kagamusha* (1980) in particular. A life-long admiration for the work of Van Gogh (who was himself inspired by Japanese woodcut print artists, especially Hiroshige Ando) was to be expressed in the *Dreams* (1990). Van Gogh has also been inspiration for a series of paintings by Takeshi Kitano, who first ventured into artistic practice after a motorbike accident in 1994. Colourful and playful canvases that he continued to create in the following years have been included in some of his films – *Hanabi* (1997), *Kikujiro* (1999) and most notably *Achilles and the Tortoise* (2008). The lives of artists have also proved inspirational for film-makers in cases such as Kenji Mizoguchi's *Utamaro and his Five Women* (1946) and Seijun Suzuki's *Yumeji* (1991).

The border territory between art and film provides a field for constant exploration, and for the continuous evolution of the relationships between text and image, representation and reality, space and perception. Within the Japanese context, referencing traditional art history and media, as well as the appropriation of globalized film imagery, plays an additional role. As a result, the field can be seen as an open domain for transnational dialogue, allowing the reassessment of understanding the many issues surrounding the always-relevant issues of identity, artistic practice and taxonomy of contemporary art.

Jelena Stojkovic



Kikujiro No Natsu, 1999, Sony Pictures Classics. Photographed by Tsuranuku Kumagai

DIRECTORS

TAKESHI KITANO

'Everyone's crazy', comments the cool-headed assassin in the finale of Takeshi Kitano's directorial debut *Violent Cop* (1989), having just off-loaded Azuma (Kitano), the violent cop of the title. It is a comment that could easily apply to nearly all the major protagonists across Kitano's fourteen films to date. Madness, and the suicide that can often follow, is a consistent preoccupation for Kitano, just as death and disability haunts his films like a spectre.

In the case of *Violent Cop*, it is illness, mental or otherwise, that drives the plot. Azuma's colleague Iwaki, already sick with terminal cancer, has been selling confiscated drugs to make enough money to support his family – though when killed by the yakuza, his death is made to look like suicide. Meanwhile, Azuma's sister Akari, the only character he treats with kindness, has been recently released from a psychiatric hospital, leaving her virtually catatonic. She is later kidnapped, drugged and raped in an act that sends her brother on a suicidal revenge mission. Indeed, *Violent Cop* sets the pattern for many a Kitano film to come, with the almost casual juxtaposition of extreme brutality (notably, the unforgettable moment when Azuma kicks a gun away from an assailant, only for it to blow off an innocent bystander's head) and physical comedy. Like a mix of *Dirty Harry* and Charlie Chaplin, as he comically kicks a young man down the street after he catches him enjoying 'relations' with his sister, Azuma may well be the craziest of all. The finale, which sees him kill his sister along with her kidnappers, proves just how close to madness he is.

Such themes have long been a part of Kitano's work, even before his near-fatal motorbike crash in August 1994, which left him with an open skull fracture, brain contusions and a fractured cheekbone, causing partial paralysis to the right side of his face. Accident or otherwise – Kitano had ridden, drunk, into a barrier without a helmet – it came at a time when he was at his lowest ebb. *Sontaine* (1993), his masterly third film about a yakuza who decides to quit the life of crime, had failed to find an audience in Japan. Already, Kitano was well aware that those reared on his outrageous television appearances as in game shows like *Takeshi's Castle* (1986–1999) were unwilling to accept him as a serious actor-director. Little wonder, then, that *Sonatine* brims with an unerring pessimism as its lead character Murakawa (Kitano) contemplates the futility of existence. 'When you're scared all the time, you reach a point when you wish you were dead', he claims. By the end, he will be – putting a gun to his head after slaying his rival gangsters.

As Kitano's regular composer Joe Hisaishi later reflected of his director, 'I feel that *Sonatine* showed that he was tired of living.' He followed it with *Getting Any?* (1994), a sex comedy that symbolized his self-destructive streak. Later dubbed 'artistic suicide' by Kitano, this absurdist story of a lad who just wants to get laid is a riotous piece of self-mockery. If this does not sound like the work of a man contemplating the end of his life, his long-time producer Mori Masayuki noted on the shoot that '[w]e began to be concerned that Kitano was beginning to lose his mental balance.'

The subsequent accident changed all that – yet Kitano's fascination with death did not diminish. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the high point of his career came shortly afterwards. After completing his comeback with *Kids Return* (1996), his amiable autobiographical account of his schooldays, he made *Hana-Bi* (1997), the film that went on to win the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. This story of the near-silent unstable cop Nishi (Kitano) represented something of a catharsis for the writer-director-star. Curiously, the film almost feels like a sequel to *Violent Cop*. In both, Kitano is a renegade police officer; in both, he follows acts of savagery with tender feelings towards

a loved one. In the case of *Hana-Bi*, these are towards his wife, who is dying of leukaemia – a tragic fact that inspires him to take her on one final road trip, winding up at the beach (echoing Azuma's outing with his sister). Similarly, Nishi demonstrates the suicidal tendencies of Azuma: 'Go on, shoot me punk!' he cries to a debt-chasing hoodlum. The film turns on the fact that Nishi's former partner Horibe (Ren Osugi) has been confined to a wheelchair following a shoot-out in a shopping mall. Distraught and depressed, Horibe attempts suicide by swallowing sleeping pills. When he survives, he turns to painting – using materials secretly paid for by Nishi. Featuring real paintings by Kitano, made during his recuperation from his accident, these bizarre but beautiful works (an owl with sunflower eyes, penguins with orchid heads and so on) suggest the redemptive power of art.

Strangely, in Kitano's later film *Achilles and the Tortoise* (2008), he questioned the very usefulness of art. Once again, suicide is prominent – as the young artist-wannabe Machisu (played later as a grown-up by Kitano) is orphaned after his parents' business crumbles and they kill themselves. He then spends his life trying to make his fortune through painting, convinced that, if it sells, it is great art. The more obsessed (another key Kitano theme) Machisu becomes, the more he risks losing his family, friends and, above all, health. Art can be cruel – particularly to those who do not recognize their own limitations. *Achilles and the Tortoise* arrived as the third of a self-reflective trilogy, following *Takeshis'* (2005) and *Glory to the Filmmaker!* (2007), an examination of his own status as a director. *Takeshis'*, meanwhile, examines his 'Beat' Takeshi persona and how it has impacted upon his life. Seen by some as a sequel of sorts to *Getting Any?*, it represents a second 'artistic suicide', quite literally as the title can be read as read as *Takeshi and Shis* ('shisu' means 'to die' in Japanese), suggesting *Takeshi Dies*.

Likewise, *Dolls* (2002), Kitano's most deliberately artificial and highly symbolic film shows that we are never far from tipping over the edge. Three separate but intertwining stories about the uncompromising and obsessive nature of love, the most potent is the story of the bound beggars. Matsumoto (Hidetoshi Nishijim) and Sawako (Miho Kanno) are engaged to be married – until the former's parents beg him to marry his boss's daughter instead. Reluctantly agreeing, his decision causes Sawako to attempt suicide. She fails, but loses her sanity. Not unlike *Hana-Bi*'s Nishi, Matsumoto is guilt-ridden by his actions – and walks out of his wedding ceremony to find his former lover. When he encounters her, she is damaged and fragile – like so many of the women in Kitano's films. To ensure that he does not lose her, he connects them with a red cord – a literal example of the ties that bind. Dressed in sumptuous costumes by Yohji Yamamoto and surrounded by the vibrant colours of the changing seasons, they are destined to walk the earth as he seeks forgiveness and she her sanity. While mental illness is a Kitano staple, so is physical disability. In *Dolls*, we encounter road worker Nukui (Tsutomu Takeshig), a devoted fan of teen pop star Haruna (Kyôko Fukada). When she loses her left eye in a car accident, and withdraws from public life because she feels ashamed of her disfigurement, he blinds himself so he can meet her without being able to look upon her and cause embarrassment. The ultimate form of worship and devotion, it truly proves that love is blind.

Blindness is also a key theme in *Zatôichi* (2003), Kitano's exuberant spin on the tale of a sightless swordsman made famous by the 26 films starring Shintaro Katsu. As he wanders the countryside, playing dice, helping old ladies and slicing foes with a sword hidden in his cane, Ichi (Kitano) appears to dispense a

primitive form of justice – like many of Kitano’s characters. Being blind, he has no reason to stare his opponents down and lose his nerve; meanwhile, being able to see is as much an impairment, it seems, for it causes one to judge by appearance. As Ichi says in the final scene, when it is revealed that his blindness was a ruse to put others off-guard, ‘even with my eyes wide open, I can’t see a thing’. If he is suggesting that being able-bodied is no guarantee of being a good person, Kitano is not above mining humour from disability – a trait that stems right back to his days as a stand-up comic when he used to mock the elderly, the handicapped and the infirm in his act. In *Zatôichi*, for example, a running gag features the neighbouring ‘certified idiot’ racing around in costume pretending to be a samurai.

His earlier work *A Scene at the Sea* (1991), the film he made to help establish his Office Kitano production company, following his troubled sophomore film *Boiling Point* (1990), also finds humour in physical impairment – this time deafness. Prefiguring the blind couple in *Dolls*, the film sets out to tell a simple love story. Shigeru (Maki Kuroudo) is a deaf-mute sanitation worker hooked on surfing. His girlfriend Takako (Oshima Hiroko) is also deaf – meaning that when the announcement for the surfing competition is made, neither hear it and Shigeru is disqualified.

It all adds up to a consistent thread in the work of Takeshi Kitano that shows no signs of abating. Just as violence can strike the innocent at any moment, so can mental or physical illness. In Kitano’s world, humans – even those belonging to the yakuza – are vulnerable creatures, teetering on the brink. But for all this, his work is also tempered by hope – at least since his bike accident. Recalling the closing words of *Kids Return*, however difficult life gets, in Kitano’s mind, ‘we haven’t even started yet.’

James Mottram

Paprika, 2006. Produced
by Madhouse/Sony



DIRECTORS

SATOSHI KON

Satoshi Kon's opening credit sequences exemplify the tendency towards thematic condensation and narrative economy that is inherent within anime. Encapsulating both the respective film and Kon's entire oeuvre, these sequences thrive on surprising and disorienting editing, visually spectacular ideas and exuberant cinematic speed. They are typically Kon in that they are deliberately visceral, always setting the viewer's sights just abreast of his intellectual and social concerns. This emphasis shifts on second and third viewing, and it is clear that Kon is one of the great calculating minds of anime, a field already full of obsessive, micromanaging artists. His directorial output is, for the field, quite limited. However, Kon's debut film *Perfect Blue* (1998), the follow-ups *Millennium Actress* (2001), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) and *Paprika* (2006), and the television series *Paranoia Agent* (2004), have built a reputation and a thematic consistency that have made him an international brand name. He thus follows the path of so many Japanese directors – live action and anime – in being a complete exception within Japan but seen as being representative of his country by overseas critics and audiences.

Kon's versatility in aligning complex cinematic montage techniques with equally dense themes to spellbinding, if initially confusing, effect is not obviously explained by his background. Trained as a painter at Musashino Art University – a breeding ground for many well-known artists in cinema and animation – Kon won the Chiba Tetsuya Newcomer Award for Manga while still a student in 1984. He began work as assistant to Katsuhiro Otomo, manga artist and later the director of the seminal *Akira* (1988), shortly thereafter and wrote *World Apartment Horror* (1991), which would become Otomo's first live-action film as a director. While mainly working in manga, Kon occasionally did design the layout for various anime projects throughout the early 1990s, among them the *Patlabor: The Movie 2* (1993). In 1995, he wrote his first anime script, *Magnetic Rose*, a Madam Butterfly-deconstructing episode in another Otomo project, the anime omnibus *Memories* (1995). The story of several space travellers that follow a distress signal and stumble into a holographic simulation of a long-dead opera singer's fantasy world already featured many of the themes central to later Kon projects: the centrality of memory for the – often illusory – construction of identity, a plot revolving around a woman whose degree of reality is in question, and the inability to distinguish subjective 'reality' from so-called objective 'reality'.

It was, however, unusual in terms of its science-fiction setting. Kon would later prove himself a master of utilizing contemporary urban locations – always within Tokyo – as environments that perfectly described the embedded protagonists. Beginning with the singer-turned-actress Mima and her room in *Perfect Blue*, and reaching a pinnacle in *Tokyo Godfathers*, Kon carefully orchestrates the context his characters live in, making them inseparable from their environment and, therefore, making the surrounding ‘reality’ as tenuous as their own identity.

In *Perfect Blue*, ‘Who are you?’ is the first line that Mima must speak in her acting debut, and her frantic repetition of the question is programmatic for Kon’s entire work. His worlds are characterized by doubling, by the vibrant but disconcerting space that exists between the image and the ‘original’, between the virtual and the ‘real’. As Mima must come to terms with her own position between public image and private volition, so the homeless outcasts of *Tokyo Godfathers* reveal glimpses of hidden stories and other lives. *Paranoia Agent* deftly supplies each of its protagonists with a double life often bordering on schizophrenia, and *Paprika*’s dream-tapping device most overtly poses the question of what identity might mean when disembodiment and the surfacing of subconscious alterity become a technological possibility. ‘I want to portray truth, not facts’, Kon states in an interview on his website. The portrayal of an ever-ongoing slippage of identity and a multitude of subjectivities within every individual becomes the starting point for this project. This affects his status as an auteur as well. Although his footprint is highly visible, Kon’s collaborators have strongly helped shape what has become identified with him. All of his animation projects have been realized with involvement by Madhouse, one of the most creative anime production outfits in Japan. His frequent work with electro-pop legend Susumu Hirasawa is conceptually relevant as well: Hirasawa has frequently engaged with questions of virtual identity, both existential and gender-related, in his long career.

Fiction is thus both a topic and a conceptual tool in Kon’s output. Brimming with film quotes from such varied sources as Akira Kurosawa, Dario Argento, Terry Gilliam or David Lynch, Kon is all too easily subsumed under the label of a post-modern auteur. Yet, as perfectly constructed and coherent as Kon’s fictional worlds are, they cannot be reduced to hermetic, playful philosophical musings. Kon is aware of a social and political reality and he takes great pains to inject it into his work, even as he vigorously balances it with generous amounts of visual excess and sheer entertainment value. As Mima is caught in a delirious identity and career crisis, the newscasts in the background report on global warming and the political efforts to combat it. The three bums in *Tokyo Godfathers* are, despite the heavy doses of comedy, highly unusual heroes for anime, and the portrayal of their destitution and discrimination connects to the very real swelling of Tokyo’s homeless population. Nonetheless, Kon paradoxically remains committed to the group that most represents a retreat from politics in the public sphere. Otaku (a Japanese term for those with an obsessive interest in such things as anime, manga, and video games) rarely appear as positive figures in his work, although common themes of otaku culture figure heavily in his oeuvre. The dangerous psycho-fan in *Perfect Blue* is close to the most blatant otaku stereotypes circulating in early 1990s’ Japan and, in *Paranoia Agent*, the otaku-ish character designer Tsukiko Sagi brings Japan to the brink of destruction with a cute-dog character and an imaginary baseball bat-wielding youth that develop destructive lives of their own. Fantasy and insecurity bond with potentially disastrous consequences, a scenario Kon, despite his international success and transnational references, strangely never takes beyond Japanese concerns – at least within his own reasoning.

Alexander Zahlten