

What is Japanese Cinema? A History

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What is Japanese Cinema? A History, by Inuhiko Yomota. Translated by Philip Kaffen. Columbia University Press, 2019; 258 pages; Paperback, \$26.00.

The history of Japanese cinema seems just as—if not more—complex than the modern history of the Japanese nation itself. In *What is Japanese Cinema?* translated into English by Philip Kaffen, the Japanese film historian Inuhiko Yomota navigates readers through what has been more than a century of cinematic history in the archipelago—110 years at the time the book was published in Japanese in 2014, according to the author—covering just about every aspect of cinema one can conceive, from the movie going experiences to the collapse of the studio system and rise of independent films to the technological advances in sound, color, and digital cinema and their specific implications in the context of Japan. Of course, there is plenty here on genre, from pink films, *roman porno* and the avant garde, to early *shinpa* and *shoshimin* films and monster movies—and auteurs from every walk of life, complete with a robust filmography full of surprises and discoveries for even the most self-professed Japanese film expert.

While Japanese readers and scholars will no doubt be familiar with Yomota—as will those outside Japan who delve into works published in Japanese—he has had few works available English until now, which is a shame considering he is one of the tantamount authorities on Japanese film in his home country. Not only has he written dozens on the cinemas of Japan, Asia, and beyond, but Yomota has also delved occasionally into writing about literature, theatre, and the arts. While certainly a film historian at heart, his wider knowledge comes in handy for this monograph in particular, especially in the early years of Japanese cinema when there was plenty of crosstalk between the movies and other arts, especially Kabuki theatre, where many of the most skilled actors hailed and which influenced both cinema's presentation and themes for many

decades. Yomota pays particular attention to the ways cinema was introduced to Japan and its reception alongside well-established traditions like Kabuki. The parallels with literature and cinema cannot be ignored, and in this field, too, Yomota has critically absorbed adaptations of important literary works from cinema's inception in Japan—the gothic writer Izumi Kyoka is noted for his influence on early works of *shinpa* melodrama—but also brings to our attention the curious dabbling of major literary figures into the world of film, from Junichiro Tanizaki's forays into film production (which ultimately were a flop, at the time) and Yukio Mishima's ventures into starring in films before producing his own during the 1960s, not to mention the author's dislike of the internationally acclaimed master Akira Kurosawa.

While Yomota certainly possesses the credentials that allow him to give rich context to his writing it is perhaps the accessibility of *What is Japanese Cinema* that serves as its most rewarding feature. This is achieved with a condensed form—the entire book, with back matter and plenty of black and white stills, is less than 250 pages in print—and extremely readable prose, allowing readers to not get lost in too much jargon or lengthy, dry historical columns of text. It is also easy to navigate, largely due to the clearly structured layout, proceeding in a linear fashion and dividing the book into important eras and decades. Some earlier eras are demarcated by advances in cinematic technology—Motion Pictures is followed by Silent Films—which is followed by eras of wartime films, films in the postwar under American occupational forces, “Golden Ages” and then by decades like the 1960s, 70s, and so on.

The chapters give some context of what was happening in Japan at the time and its relation to film but by no means suggest cinema as a simple allegory of society, a perfect mirror image of Japan at that particular historical moment. Instead, Yomota's writings, even if not explicitly, offer the reader an opportunity to ponder how cinema in Japan was often at odds with and negotiated with what had occurred in real life, offering no clear victor in a fight for influence and power. Cinema indeed was not merely evidence of the linear movement of Japan across time but intermingled and clashed during the course of history. While he notes the protests of the 1960s and their relation to radical cinematic output of

directors like Koji Wakamatsu and Masao Adachi (*PFLP: A Declaration of World War*) and later mentions the rise of Marxism among youth in the late 1920s and the footprint it left on the politically charged genre of *tendency* films (1929's *What made her do it?* Which survives in incomplete form), he is careful to present these as not simply reflecting the times but also cinema's role in changing Japan at large noting the films' impact and power both at the moment and sometimes in a larger frame of time.

These full chapters are conveniently divided up into smaller sections and headers that offer insight into particularly noteworthy directors, movements, or genres. For instance, while he certainly notes the most popular masters of the Golden Age—Kurosawa and Mizoguchi, and of course Ozu—Yomota is much more nuanced in his approach to their international recognition and dedicates a section to demystify their success. In this aside he considers some of the formal features of their films that made them stand out aesthetically when brought to film festivals abroad, despite being less successful and unrepresentative of most cinema in Japan during that time: their pandering to a foreign gaze that was searching for a particular kind of “Japan” that was mythologized and almost nonexistent in the present reality. These short sections, in turn, provide an excellent way to organize the book for those looking to read it in its entirety, creating small segments that are neatly organized, but also make the monograph a useful resource for those looking to brush-up on specific time periods or even more specific details like film movements, ideas, or people.

The concisely written chapters offer a kind of crash course full of trivia that is sure to appease even the most seasoned researchers and hobbyists of Japanese film, with Yomota referring to notable auteurs and films but spending just as much time highlighting directors and films that have been given little attention in the West—Shinji Somai in the 80s is given just as much importance as New Wave masters like Nagisa Oshima. His impressive knowledge of early cinema history is especially helpful and was my biggest take away from the monograph for filling in what can be a history that can be difficult to piece together, given the lost films and few existing resources—though of course, the field of early cinema

in Japan is already rich in academic, book-length studies on stardom, film reception and practice, a brief rundown is certainly not a bad addition to this repertoire. Actually, Yomota offers so many interesting recommendations during the course of even a single *section* of a chapter, that one may be cautioned to always keep a smartphone or internet browser in the immediate vicinity while the book is open to be able to search for a film that sparks your curiosity—although, to be warned, many of the earliest films have been lost and some of the more obscure erotic films and B-movies are near impossible to track down even in Japan.

What makes *What Is Japanese Cinema* most compelling is not simply Yomota's ability to assemble a formidable encyclopedia of films and directors—although the trivia and constant references to unknown and underappreciated films is certainly appreciated and praiseworthy. His role as a historian aside, it is ultimately his position as a film *critic* that gives *What is Japanese Cinema* its most rewarding characteristics. The injections of exegesis and interpretations of these films, auteurs, industrial upheavals, and technological shifts and their relation to Japan sets his writing from being a dry historical rundown of endless facts, dates, and names. The tricky politics of war films, for example, are brought often, and Yomota is keen to note not only the most important films surrounding the war but also comments on *how* such films came to be so highly regarded or why they were produced by studios at the time, noting such points as, for instance, the lingering nostalgia for a Japan of the past—one that was more grand and powerful—while erasing any trace of controversy. He also makes particular mention of issues like minorities in Japan, thought to be a largely homogenous country, noting how Japanese directors had made its minorities invisible on screen for decades. With a small glimmer of hope, he mentions the more recent films of directors like Sai Yoichi, who has brought attention to *zainichi* Korean issues in his films, changing how they are represented on screen and finally acknowledging what had remained silent for so long.

What is also of interest is how the author observes the ways other areas of Asia intersect with Japan over the course of film history. While the history of early cinema is certainly more confined to Japan proper

(thought there are certainly many instances of collaboration and exchange), his most interesting chapter is one that discusses the production and distribution of cinema during and before the war in Japan's colonies. Here Yomota notes the role of film in these overseas territories—Taiwan, the puppet state of *Manchukuo* in China, Korea, and the Philippines—noting how the Japanese empire was deeply interested in cinema as a tool for carrying out its agenda under the Japanese empire's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Not only were films from the “mainland” screened actively in these regions during and before the war for the purpose uniting and enlightening lands at the fringes of Japan's wartime empire, but they were also produced in the colonies, with Japan effectively bringing the technology and know-how with them—not to mention theaters and sowing the seeds of movie going. Yomota makes note of the irony in this exchange many decades later when the “New Waves” of Asian cinema—the Taiwan New Wave, Hong Kong New Wave, and “Fifth Generation” from China—formed colonies that made waves on the international film festival circuit much like Japan had in the post-war era, reversed the flow of cinema from the center/periphery from the colonial period by distributing and working on their films, acclaimed at worldwide international festivals, in Japan. While there is still a tendency for films to gloss over the complex past and current debates within Asia and with other nations relations with Japan—Shunji Iwai's *Swallowtail Butterfly* is one of Yomota's recent examples of a shallow surface-reading of this—he is hopeful, amid a lot of anxiety about the present state of film, that Japanese cinema will press on.

Yomota does express hope regarding the rise of female directors, another noteworthy addition to his journey through Japanese film. He notes the recognition abroad of the auteur Naomi Kawase, who would go on to direct the film for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics (Inuhiko mentions the controversial predecessor in this book, Kon Ichikawa's *Tokyo Olympiad* made for the 1964 Olympic games) and offers a detailed rundown of women's place in the director's chair—or rather, their disappointing absence—over the course of Japanese cinema history. The eradication of the studio system and the changing audiences ushered in by the shift in

the experience of viewing cinema in mini theaters—which are now more welcome to all audiences, as opposed to being perhaps more male centered in the past—women are now slowly arming themselves with movie camera, much more accessible than in the past, as a means of expression.

While these are noteworthy asides in *What is Japanese Cinema*, Yomota also makes some oversight, especially in the category of animation. He takes up this subset of “film” in what feels like a very belated portion of the book—in the 80s—and makes little mention of it elsewhere. Perhaps his exclusion of a more detailed and nuanced exploration of animation and cinema is on account of the wealth of information already known about directors like Hayao Miyazaki and Mamoru Oshii both in Japan and overseas, but at its core his exclusion may also attest to the compounding difficulty of integrating studies of Japanese anime with cinema proper, serving as evidence of the ongoing debate of where to draw the line between what constitutes cinema and what does not. One could perhaps argue that animation has its own complex history outside the scope of Yomota’s book—this is certainly true, considering animation’s bleeding into the history of television—but it feels like an oversight nonetheless of what could be an interesting and worthwhile inquiry. Documentary is also not given as much attention, although it could be argued that Japanese documentary has its own unique history that, like anime, oscillates between theaters and televisions and is written about extensively elsewhere. Yomota of course does not ignore documentary completely, and *What is Japanese Cinema* contains information about some of the most landmark directors in the craft: Shinsuke Ogawa, who directed the *Sanrizuka* films about the seizing of land for Narita airport, the personal and affecting documentaries of Kazuo Hara and the scrupulous documentary films on the Minamata disease that became the lifework of Noriaki Tsuchimoto.

Steeped in information, the reader feels challenged to keep up with the rather rapid pace at which Yomota has condensed over a century of history. While the brevity is certainly a merit for those with the background knowledge of Japanese history and moving pictures, those who are looking for an introduction right off the bat to Japanese

cinema—and Japanese history in general—may get lost in the details, and without a preexisting roadmap it may be difficult to stay on track. Originally intended for a Japanese audience, Yomota may be presuming that most of these dates and historical events are already common knowledge for his readers. A bit of a crash course on Japanese history and of cinema's evolution would go a long way in preparing readers for the book. Nevertheless, it would be a perfect accompaniment to a course on Japanese cinema, with its readability and quick pace that includes so many references to films and directors without spending too much time on a specific period, director, film, or movement. Even a fundamental Japanese history course may find the book an interesting supplement for its insights into understanding Japanese society through the moving image.

One may also find that the conclusion—or lack thereof—to just about every chapter is slightly lacking. Most of the chapters begin with a short recap of what the decade will entail, its overall climate, and ideas to keep in mind before delving into specifics; but the chapters end without rounding out the discussions so far or even making an attempt to offer a brief, even single sentence transition into the next section. The book itself, too, seems to end abruptly without a conclusion or a summary of the events so far. For the most part, though, Yomota does this in his provocative and intriguing introduction, which serves as perhaps one of the most important takeaways for Japanese film studies enthusiasts, as he presents the reasonings and rationale for the book and some current debates of the historiography of Japanese cinema.

These are miniscule complaints, however, and do not distract from what Yomota has achieved in one of his first translations in English: a welcome primer on Japanese film that pays just as much attention to vanguard filmmakers like Takamine Go from Okinawa and the creator of over-the-top action-meets-art films in the 60s (and 70s and 80s) revered by the masters of cinema Akira Kurosawa (revered at one point as “emperor”, according to Yomota) and Yasujiro Ozu. The book comes highly recommended and has something to offer to both those looking for more detailed insight or an introduction to Japanese film, but also those who have extensive knowledge of the topic. *What is Japanese*

Cinema covers so much ground that anyone is sure to find an obscure film that sparks their interest, a director that warrants their attention, or a theme that requires reexamination somewhere in its pages.