

SPECIAL JAPAN FILM SCREENINGS

Aoyama Shinji Visit Pre-Events

Japanese film director Aoyama Shinji will be visiting Yale in April 2005. In preparation of this important visit, the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale University is pleased to present special screenings of films by his favorite filmmakers.

Prints courtesy of The Japan Foundation

Notes prepared by Aaron Gerow

Our Blood Will Not Forgive

俺たちの血が許さない Oretachi no chi ga yurusanai

Directed by Suzuki Seijun

監督 鈴木清順

Nikkatsu, 1964, 97 minutes, 35mm

Producer: Takagi Masayuki
Screenplay: Takemori Ryoma, Hosomi Katsuhiro, Ito Michiko
Original Story: Matsuura Kenro
Photography: Mineshige Yoshi
Art Direction: Kimura Takeo

Cast:

Ryota: Kobayashi Akira
Shinji: Takahashi Hideki
Yasuko: Matsubara Chieko
Nanbata: Ozawa Eitaro
Ushigoro: Inoue Shobun
Katagai: Takashina Kaku
Mie: Hase Yuri

Suzuki Seijun (born 1923) represents both the past and the present of foreign interest in Japanese cinema. For the first half of his career, he was a studio director, working at Nikkatsu from the late 1950s churning out "Nikkatsu Action" films featuring gangsters, tough guys, and sometimes a bit of flesh. He wasn't even a top director at the studio, never earning a chance, for instance, with Nikkatsu's greatest star, Ishihara Yujiro, but always getting assigned actors the next rank down, like Shishido Jo, Wada Koji, and Takahashi Hideki. Early foreign histories of Japanese film never mentioned him because he did not fit the pattern of art cinema or humanistic melodrama favored by international film festivals or critics. Yet he actually had a significant following in Japan. For within his formulaic films, he added a distinct aesthetic touch, a "delirious" style that caught the attention of many critics

and young cinephiles in the 1960s. His movies became more outrageous and excessive until Nikkatsu fired him in 1968 for making “incomprehensible” films, a move that actually prompted Tokyo street demonstrations and protests from Oshima Nagisa and others in the film world. Seijun—as he is usually called—did not make another film for ten years, and when he did, his work was more experimental, as he developed the “erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical” atmosphere of the Taisho era in which he was born into a luxuriously fantastic cinema. It was at this time, however, that foreign appreciation of Japanese film began to change, as the rise of anime, manga and other Japanese pop culture products increased interest in popular genres, especially their more eccentric manifestations. Seijun’s genre work became a prime target to be “discovered,” and a flurry of foreign retrospectives in the early nineties sparked a surge in video and DVD releases such that now over eight of his films are available in the US (such as *Tokyo Drifter* (1966), *Youth of the Beast* (1964), and *Fighting Elegy* (1966)), and directors like Jim Jarmusch make films in homage to him (*Ghost Dog*). Ironically, it is now his consciously art cinema masterpieces like *Zigeunerweisen* (1980) that have yet to be released on DVD here.

Our Blood Will Not Forgive is one of his lesser-known works, but in many ways representative. First, it gives us a good example of what Seijun worked in: the core of Nikkatsu Action, where male action (here featuring stars Kobayashi Akira and Takahashi Hideki), brotherhood, and betrayal drive the narrative, while women can only stand by and watch or suffer. But unlike Toei’s yakuza movies, where gangsters in the past fight for traditional values, this Nikkatsu tale of two sons of a murdered mob boss trying to resist the temptations of the gangster life is resolutely contemporary, avoiding “Japaneseness” through rich colors and modern sets, thus creating the “nationless” (mukokuseki) look Nikkatsu was famous for. At the same time, Seijun and his frequent collaborator, art director Kimura Takeo, go one step further, rendering this world even more stylized and theatrical to the point of occasionally disrupting the narrative or genre formulae. Look for the famous car scene, where the rain denudes the scene of three-dimensionality, re-emphasizing the surface spectacle of the flat screen, and thus celebrates the dance of light and shadow that is cinema.

Suggested Readings:

Field, Simon and Tony Rayns. *Branded to thrill: the delirious cinema of Suzuki Seijun*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1994.

Hampton, Howard. “Four play - Japanese movie director Seijun Suzuki.” *ArtForum*. Apr99, Vol. 37 Issue 8, p27.

Isoda Tsutomu, ed. *Seijun sutairu = Seijun style*. Tokyo: Waizu Shuppan, 2001.

Ueno Koshi. *Suzuki Seijun zenshigoto*. Tokyo: Rippu Shobo, 1986.

Twisted Path of Love

恋人たちは濡れた Koibitotachi wa nureta

Directed by Kumashiro Tatsumi

監督 神代辰巳

Nikkatsu, 1973, 76 minutes, 35mm

Producer: Miura Akira
Screenplay: Kumashiro Tatsumi, Kamoda Koji
Photography: Himeda Shinsaku
Music: Oe Tetsu
Editing: Inoue Osamu

Cast:

Yoko: Nakagawa Rie
Yoshie: Ezawa Moeko
Sachiko: Kei Chiro
Katsu: Oe Tetsu
Mitsuo: Horii Koichi

Soft porn films have long enjoyed a higher position in Japan within the cinema hierarchy than in other nations. From the mid-1960s, “pink films” (as they were often called) became in some ways a cause célèbre as directors like Wakamatsu Koji, Yamatoya Atsushi and Adachi Masao turned the genre into a vehicle for radical political and artistic expression. When the major commercial studio Nikkatsu decided to avoid bankruptcy in 1971 by turning its entire production line over to soft porn—what they called “Nikkatsu Roman Porno”—the resulting films ended up becoming historically one of the most important phenomena in postwar Japanese cinema history. Not only were the works some of the most critically acclaimed in Japan during the 1970s, as films by Kumashiro Tatsumi, Konuma Masaru, Sone Chusei, and Tanaka Noboru often entered critics’ top ten lists, but as the studio system fell apart in Japan, the still prolific Nikkatsu and other pink producers became practically the only training ground for new talent. Most of the major directors active from the 1980s on—Morita Yoshimitsu (*Family Game*), Suo Masayuki (*Shall We Dance*), Kaneko Shusuke (*Gamera*), Higashi Yoichi (*Village of Dreams*), Takita Yojiro (*Onmyoji*), Somai Shinji (*Typhoon Club*), Nakata Hideo (*Ring*), to name a few—got their start or worked for a time in the soft porn industry. Even today, some of the brightest new directors, from Zeze Takahisa to Meike Mitsuru, began their careers in soft porn. Actors from underground theater often appeared in pink cinema, and some like Ishibashi Renji, Miyashita Junko, and Ezawa Moeko became major film performers. In this low budget industry with a largely guaranteed audience, directors only had to put in three sex scenes (with no real penetration or visible genitals), and they could do what they want with the rest. Many thus used the genre to pursue a variety of artistic and political interests, from character studies to cinematic experiments, from depicting the ennui of the age to using sex as a radical political tool.

Kumashiro Tatsumi (1927-1995) was the most critically acclaimed of all the

Nikkatsu Roman Porno directors, as many of his films reached the top ten in critics polls held by mainstream journals like *Kinema junpo*. After graduating from Waseda University in 1952, Kumashiro found employment at the Shochiku studios only to switch over to Nikkatsu when it resumed production in 1954. He worked under such directors as Saito Buichi and Kurahara Koreyoshi until he earned his first directing assignment in 1968. That, however, was not a commercial success, and he only came into his own as a director after Nikkatsu switched to Roman Porno. His films such as *Ichijo Sayuri* (*Ichijo Sayuri: Nureta yokujo*, 1972), *World of Geisha* (*Yojohan fusuma no urabari*, 1973), *The Woman with Red Hair* (*Akai kami no onna*, 1979), and *Street of Joy* (*Akasen Tamanoi: Nukeraremasu*, 1974) served not only as complex portraits of tough, gritty women, but also as profound, often self-reflexive analyses of the emptiness of the age and of the technologies of cinema and censorship. *Twisted Path of Love* was one of the few films to focus on a male character, Katsu, who wanders into a dilapidated seaside town and begins working at a movie theater. While it becomes clear he actually was originally from this town, he constantly denies this, ultimately embodying a nomadic loss of identity representative of Japan after the failure of the 1960s, a frustration that erupts in violent sexuality. Kumashiro remained largely unknown outside of Japan until after his death, when several international retrospectives helped increase his fame and now several of his film are available in DVD in the US.

Roman Porno and pink cinema remain an understudied aspect of Japanese cinema abroad. While problematic in its occasional equation of existential rebellion with sexual violence against women, the genre also functioned as a central vehicle for rethinking cinema and representation after the New Wave of the 1960s. Its influence continue today.

Suggested Readings:

Johnson, William. "A New View of Porn: The Films of Tatsumi Kumashiro." *Film Quarterly* Fall 2003, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 11-19.

Yamane Sadao, ed. *Kanno no puroguramu pikuchua: roman poruno, 1971-1982 zen eiga*. Tokyo: Firumu Atosha, 1983.