

Mutual  
Images

ISSUE 9

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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS  
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN  
PART 2

MUTUAL IMAGES  
ISSUE 9 – AUTUMN 2020

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS  
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN  
PART 2

EDITED BY  
MARCO PELLITTERI & JOSÉ ANDRÉS SANTIAGO IGLESIAS

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

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# ***The Japanese Cinema Book*** **- FUJIKI Hideaki & Alastair PHILLIPS (eds)**

London: The British Film Institute/Bloomsbury, 2020, 624 p.

Review by Alejandra ARMENDÁRIZ-HERNÁNDEZ | University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

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Japanese film studies is an academic discipline and research community focusing on the multifaceted aspects of Japanese cinema. Deeply interdisciplinary, it employs theories, critical approaches and methods from different fields such as film studies and cultural studies to understand Japanese films as works of art, cultural products and social practices. What makes a film “Japanese”, and even what is a film, are far from easy questions, particularly in the globalised, transnational and digitalised world in which we now live, but nevertheless are issues that define the discipline and its historiography.

Yomota Inuhiko puts it simply in the preface to the English edition of his *What is Japanese Cinema* (2019), stressing that in the study of “Japanese cinema” the choice of which word to emphasize, “Japanese” or “cinema”, makes a big difference:

Those who prioritize “cinema” will put all filmmakers [...] on one horizontal plane. The history of Japanese cinema is but a portion of the history of world cinema. That Kurosawa [Akira] is Japanese is merely incidental and what is significant is the extent to which his works contribute to the expansion of the global language of technical images. A person who loves cinema transcends ethnic or national boundaries.

In other words, from this point of view Japanese films as any film are universal and share the specific language of cinema, so anyone able to understand that language can appreciate and study them as part of the cinematic art. On the other hand, Japanese cinema can be also considered and studied as part of the Japanese culture. As Yomota argues:

From this perspective, it is impossible to ignore cinema’s intimate connections with Japanese culture, from literature to painting and theater. [...] You need to know not just

the culture but also the realities of Japanese history and society.

For Yomota and this reviewer, a combination of both approaches is ideal. Japanese cinema cannot be understood without taking into consideration its cultural, industrial and historical context of production and reception within the Japanese society and history. However, the study of Japanese films is also intertwined with the histories, theories and developments of films and visual cultures worldwide and thus transcends the national framework to terms of interactions, audiences and meanings. Fortunately, in the past decades, the research on Japanese cinema, carried out inside and outside Japan, by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars, has steadily advanced in that direction. Recent anthologies, such as Miyao (2014) and Bernardi and Ogawa (2021) explore Japanese cinema from multiple perspectives, widening the scope of what is considered a Japanese film and thus Japanese film studies as a discipline.

Belonging to this trend, *the Japanese Cinema Book* departs from any “pre-given, monolithic, self-sufficient and stable” categorisation to question the “national boundary of ‘Japanese’ and the media boundary of ‘cinema’” as something “fluid and contested on a number of levels” (p. 1). In fact, as stated in the introduction by its editors Fujiki Hideaki (Nagoya University) and Alastair Philips (University of Warwick), the book has come together on the consideration of Japanese cinema and its study in terms of multiplicity (of theoretical and methodological approaches), historical contextualisation and cross-boundary relations (p.11).

While contributors in every chapter analyse and engage with Japanese films and the specificities of Japanese cinema, the way *The Japanese Cinema Book* is organised by areas of study and key concepts shows a conscious attempt to position the volume within the general field of film studies. In the introduction, the editors argue that

“the emergence of a more rigorous and empirical Japanese cinema studies has also simultaneously resulted in a degree of marginalisation from the larger field of cinema and media studies. [...] It is still necessary to move beyond language barriers and boost collaboration between Japanese cinema studies and non-Japanese cinema and media studies” (p. 10).

Responding to this challenge, *The Japanese Cinema Book* is structured in seven thematic parts (1. Theories and Approaches; 2. Institutions and Industry; 3. Film Style; 4. Genre; 5. Time and Spaces of Representation; 6. Social Contexts, and 7. Flows and Interactions)

which in fact can be seen as the different categories and frameworks applied in the wide-ranging study of films and cinema industries. Published by Bloomsbury on behalf of the British Film Institute (BFI), its title and structure of the publication are reminiscent of the seminal *The Cinema Book* edited by Pam Cook (first published by the BFI in 1985, and then in 1999 and 2007, co-edited with Mieke Bernink), which has become “a landmark film studies text, presenting in accessible form two decades of intellectual activity on the subject” (BFI 2020). In this sense, *The Japanese Cinema Book* might be seen as an effort to support the reintegration of Japanese film studies into cinema studies, going beyond the barrier of Japanese language and the status of Japanese films as mere objects representing Japanese culture and used to test and demonstrate Western film theory.

Grouped in those seven parts *The Japanese Cinema Book* presents 40 chapters written by Japanese and non-Japanese researchers based in institutions all around the world, mainly in Japan, North-America and the UK. Preceding the title of every chapter, there is a key concept that is analysed through the prism of Japanese cinema. Topics range from canonical elements in film theory, industry and aesthetics, such as Authorship, Spectatorship, Narrative, Technology, Stardom, Cinematography, Acting, Set design, Music and Melodrama, to more Japan-specific issues affecting and emerging from Japanese history and cinematic culture, for example, *Jidaigeki*, Anime, the Yakuza Film, Empire, The Occupation, and Japanese cinema in relation to its post-colonial history, Hollywood and Europe. Other thematic and interdisciplinary topics also discussed are Gender and Sexuality, Transmedia Relations, the Archive, Ecology, The City, Minority Cultures, Globalisation, and Transnational Remakes and adaptations, among others.

In its engagement with these key concepts and topics, chapters in *The Japanese Cinema Book* display different strategies and approaches. Some of the chapters explicitly reflect upon and historicise those concepts within the history of Japan, Japanese cinema and/or Japanese film studies, considering the discourses, meanings and relations permeating those notions. For instance, in chapter 1, Aaron Gerow examines the history and debates surrounding the studies of early Japanese cinema as a site where the notion of Japanese films as something Other, different from Hollywood and European cinemas, is negotiated and complicated by issues of nation, identity and the actual position of film scholars. Similarly, chapter 2 by Alexander Jacoby historically examines the consideration of the director as the film’s primary author by film critics and scholars both in Japan and in the West, illuminating “broader questions about the nature of the medium, the workings of the

industry and the place of a national cinema in an evolving international context” (p.39). Hori Hikari introduces in chapter 6 a historical and conceptual overview of the research on gender and sexuality representations in Japanese film studies through the fundamental categories of analysis in feminism film studies such as representation, women’s film/and women’s cinema (*josei eiga*), spectatorship and authorship.

One of the interesting elements in Gerow, Jacoby and Hori’s chapters, which can also be found in most chapters of *The Japanese Cinema Book*, is their impetus to frame the discussion as a dialogue between Anglophone and Japanese-language scholarships. As Hori eloquently writes, it is a dialogue that “has not always involved direct communication” (p. 94) nor explicit relationships of influence. Nevertheless, she also recognises that “both scholarships have articulated urgent concerns that resonate with each other despite their different temporal and spatial locations” (p. 94). Other examples of this historicising approach are also developed in chapters 3 and 22: In the former, editor Fujiki Hideaki examines discourses and debates encompassing the notion of “spectator” as subject and agent, before studying the specific case of the construction of a racialised spectatorship ideal during the Japanese empire; in the latter, Thomas Lamarre explores different paradigms to situate and define ‘what anime is’ in terms of art history, animation films, television series and new media in contemporary Japan. A more chronological approach can also be found in chapters 7, 8, 9 and 13 which offer historical accounts of the developments of the Japanese studio system, exhibition sites, censorship rules and experimental filmmaking respectively.

Some other chapters focus on specific films, filmmakers, places and practices as case studies to analyse the proposed key concepts and topics, often combining socio-historical and theoretical contextualisation with formal and narrative analysis. Films scrutinised in detail include: *That Night’s Wife* (Ozu Yasujirō, 1930), examined in chapter 23 by Misono Ryoko in terms of modernity and melodrama; *The Love of Sumako the Actress* (Mizoguchi Kenji, 1947), employed by Kinoshita Chika to rethink film acting traditions in Japan (chapter 17); and Ōshima Nagisa’s *Sing a Song of Sex* (1967) analysed by Ko Mika from an intersectional perspective in regard to the representation and position of *zainichi* Korean women in Japanese culture (chapter 34). Among the actors and directors discussed in depth are performer and singer Miwa Akihiro (chapter 12), horror film director Nakagawa Nobuo (chapter 21), yakuza films’ heroine Fuji Junko (chapter 25) and documentalist Ogawa Shinsuke (chapter 26). In addition, there are also

chapters which concentrate on films united by a particular topic or genre, such as chapter 24 on the musical genre with films featuring popular singers and actors Misora Hibari, Eri Chiemi and Yukimura Izumi, and the stimulating chapter on Ecology (27), which analyses the so-called 3.11 cinema (the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami and atomic meltdown) considering their representation of the human-nature interdependency through the visualisation of toxic and contaminated landscapes.

Discussions about places and locations, both physical and imaginary, are one of the main themes running throughout *The Japanese Cinema Book*. In terms of representations, there are chapters investigating the cinematic images of the rural landscapes (chapter 28) and the visual construction of the domestic space (chapter 29) and the city of Tokyo (chapter 30) in 1950s Japanese cinema. Important places for film viewing and preservation, such as film festivals and archives, are examined in chapter 11 and chapter 15. In the first one, Ma Ran adopts a double approach to the concept of *eigasai* (film festival), interrogating the history of screening Japanese films at European-American festivals and the film festival culture in Japan today. In chapter 15 Oliver Dew explores the notion of archive via the examination of home/amateur films and its film festival networks as local, decentred archives which transform the status of the film object. The historical and physical geographies of Japanese cinema are considered in chapters such as chapter 31 in which Yan Ni focuses on film production and reception in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, and chapter 38 in which Andrew Dorman deals with complex representations of Okinawa in Japanese films as defined by core-periphery exchange relationships.

Also, some chapters go beyond and complicate the understanding of Japanese cinema as cultural texts determined by the national boundaries of Japan. They deploy a transnational approach at different levels to highlight the hybridity and global nature of Japanese films and film discourses. For example, in chapter 4, Yamamoto Naoki explores the critical reception and influence of Soviet montage theory in Japanese cinema and film culture in the 1920's and 1930's; Cobus van Staden (chapter 35) investigates the global appeal of Japanese popular culture via fandom communities in South Africa; and Ryan Cook in chapter 40 closes the book with a study of the Japanese adaptation of *Casablanca*. In fact, the seventh and last part of the book discusses the flows and interactions present in Japanese cinema in relation to other Asian countries (chapter 36), Hollywood (chapter 37), Okinawa (chapter 38) and Europe (chapter 39).

As suggested by this, necessarily concise, review of the content, *The Japanese Cinema Book* is a multifaceted piece of work offering the state of art in the study of Japanese films. While it certainly provides a balanced and diverse understanding of the subject, and covers a wide range of theoretical approaches, film and filmmakers, there is surely still room for development. The editors reasonably don't claim the book to be comprehensive nor to be the definitive account on Japanese cinema, but to "provoke stimulating debate and discussion within the numerous academic and cultural contexts around the world where the subjects of Japan and cinema continue to arise." (p.17). In this sense, one direction which could be explored further regards going beyond the English and Euro-American scholarship to include other geographical and linguistic areas in the production of knowledge on Japanese films, for example in relation to Latino American, Arab and African countries.

In any case, the diversity of perspectives available in *The Japanese Cinema Book* makes the volume compelling and relevant to both students and researchers of Japanese cinema, and to those interested in film culture anywhere. Moreover, the structure of the book makes it also a useful teaching material in English-speaking countries, not only in courses on Japanese culture within Japanese/East Asian studies, but also beyond these fields, in film and media courses, which are still too often centred in European and North American (i.e. Hollywood) cinemas and filmmakers. For instance, why not use this book and Japanese films to explore basic concepts in film studies such as film authorship and stardom? Or to discuss genre theories or film style? Publications such as *The Japanese Cinema Book* can surely help to incorporate non-Western cinemas to film studies courses widening students understanding of cinema and film studies as a discipline.

Last but not least, an extra positive point is the compact format and affordable price of the book, which makes it attractive and available not only to institutions or university libraries but to anyone interested in deepening their knowledge of Japanese films.

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