

20 Years of the Japanese of Japan

a world cinema case study

Looking ahead towards your A2 Film Studies topics? Get ahead of the game with a taste of a fascinating cinematic culture combining tradition and modernity that has helped to shape our contemporary media culture: the cinema of Japan 1950-1970.

Mark Ramey suggests some approaches for your study, identifies some key films, and explains just why this multifaceted period is so rewarding.



The new WJEC specification for AS and A2 Film is well underway and many teachers and students will now be looking beyond the summer exams towards the A2 course. As for AS, only two modules remain – FM3 for coursework, and FM4 for examination, broken down into three examined sections: A – World Cinema topics; B – Spectatorship topics and C – Single Film Critical Studies. This article is designed to steer a course through one of the four topic areas available in the section on **World Cinema: Japanese Cinema, 1950-1970**.

Unpacking the WJEC rubric reveals a number of important points.

1. Whichever topic you choose, this is *not* an auteur study.
2. We *do not need* comprehensively to cover the entire period, 1950-1970.
3. **Four films** – two principal texts and two supplementary texts will be ample.
4. **Production contexts** are important.
5. The concept of a '**national cinema**' needs to be interrogated.

This article will discuss these ideas, identify some key texts and describe their contexts, steering clear of the well-trodden auteur pathways and exploring the very nature of the 'national' in film studies.

Japan's global culture: old and new

Contemporary Japan represents a strange mixture of the old and the new. Japan is a Westernised, industrial giant in the far east of the planet, and Asia's largest economy. The capital city of Tokyo is synonymous with neon and modernist skyscrapers: it is a city of young, techno-hungry, metropolitans racing at a frantic pace into the science-fiction heart of the 21st century. *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, USA, 2005) perfectly constructs a sense of this stereotypical madness; but it remains as much a journalistic fable as 'Swinging London' or 'Cool Britannia'. Of course there is some truth in this representation as many hi-tech aspects of contemporary Japanese culture have already spread to the West: **manga** – comic strips and their book collections which now have their own sections in high street



黒沢明 監督作品

七人の侍

脚本 黒沢明・橋本忍・小国英雄
監督 黒沢明
主演 三船敏郎
音楽 斎藤寅次郎
撮影 渡辺 邦男
美術 山田 雄三

book chains; **animé** – animated films, the cyber-punk brilliance of *Akira* (Katsushiro, Japan, 1988) and in particular the **Disney-distributed Studio Ghibli products** such as *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2001). Then there are the technological giants like Sony which is also one of the world's biggest multinational media organisations. Japanese culture has in many ways become a global culture too. This impression is given even more weight when one notes our reliance on Japanese cars, computers, TV sets, music systems and phones. It's no surprise therefore that there is interest in all aspects of Japanese life, of which cinema is but one facet.

An ancient island Empire

Although out of our remit, contemporary Japanese cinema has had a major influence (alongside Studio Ghibli) through the identification of the 'J-Horror' sub-genre in classics like Nakata's, *The Ring* (Japan, 1998); in the hyper-brutal urban action films of Takashi Miike's *Ichii The Killer* (Japan, 2001) and *Audition* (Japan, 1999) and the brooding menace of actor/ auteur Takashi Kitano, famous for his portrayal of a sadistic teacher in *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku, Japan, 2000) and a blind, sword fighting monk in his own *Zaitochi* (Kitano, Japan, 2003).

However, part of Japan's appeal is not the new but the old – it is its ancient culture that also fascinates us. Of prurient interest are the 'geisha girls', high-class entertainers with gorgeous kimonos (*Memoirs of a Geisha*,

Marshal, USA, 2006) and the violent Samurai warriors with their supreme swordsmanship and fierce loyalty (*The Last Samurai*, Zwick, USA, 2003). Japan has a distinct antique culture partly because, as an island nation, it practised a period of intense isolation from the early 1600s to the late 1800s. Only sustained Western pressure and a political coup, leading to the restoration of the Emperor Meiji, ended the power of the samurai and opened up the country for trade and modernisation.

A military dictatorship from the 1930s reflected Japan's Imperial dreams in the Pacific and ultimately led to the audacious attack on the USA Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour in 1941 (captured in film from an American perspective in *Pearl Harbour*, Bay, USA, 2001). The bloody battles that followed in and around the Pacific have been brilliantly chronicled by Clint Eastwood in his two companion films: *Flags of Our Fathers* (USA, 2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (USA, 2006), the latter performed entirely in Japanese. World War 2 was of course devastating for the Japanese who had 25% of all their cities destroyed in bombing raids and who eventually suffered the cataclysmic devastation of the world's first (and hopefully last) atomic bomb attacks: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Miraculously, however, post-war Japan rose from the ashes like a phoenix and with the characteristic zeal of the Japanese the country modernised at a fierce pace. Old traditions were lost as new cities and a new Westernised youth culture developed at a startling pace: a transformative culture mirrored in the technological wonders of the 200mph Shinkansen or 'Bullet Trains' and the international recognition afforded by the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. There were of course tensions – political, economic and social – which Japan is still dealing with. For every 100 fans of the ubiquitous manga there is a devotee of Zen Buddhism or the native animistic religion of Japan, Shinto (*Pom Poko*, Takahata, 1994). For every fan of the *Final Fantasy* computer game there are advocates of the ancient martial arts of Kendo, Sumo and Karate. Japan is both a very old and a very new



place; and it is this contradiction and the tensions it produces that is often explored in its film making.

Japanese cinema

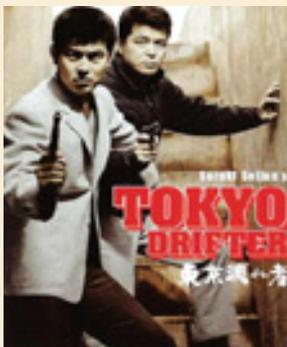
Cinema arrived in Japan less than a year after the Lumiere's **Parisian premiere of the cinematographe in 1896** and it swiftly proved a crowd pleaser, although interestingly for a middle-class audience, rather than with the working-classes as was typical in the West. However, the specific Western interest in Japanese cinematic culture can be traced back to 1951 when the Venice Film Festival awarded the Golden Lion Award to **Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*** (Japan, 1950).

Kurosawa is widely regarded as one of the **three great auteurs in the classical post-war period sitting alongside the equally great Ozu and Mizoguchi**. Each is widely acclaimed in

the art house circles rivalling the influence and prestige of Western auteurs like Welles, Goddard or Hitchcock. It is Kurosawa's legacy, however, which is the greatest. A perfect introduction to the early years of our period is his film ***Rashomon*** which opened Western eyes to Japanese film. ***Rashomon*** can be a difficult text for the newcomers because of its philosophical musings on the relativity of truth and human nature (humanist themes typical of Kurosawa). As set texts are now no longer favoured by the WJEC (other than in the Single Film Critical Studies unit) you no longer have to study ***Rashomon*** – though I'd argue that any serious student of this period **should** watch it. I would however suggest other films in the Kurosawa oeuvre, in particular the film-club favourite, ***The Seven Samurai*** (Japan, 1954).

This film demonstrates one of the classical auteurs at the height of his powers whilst also working within a generic tradition: the genre in question is the **Jidai-geki or period film which in this case focuses on seven ronin (masterless Samurai), who find meaning in their lives by defending some poor villagers against a band of merciless bandits**. Alongside magisterial performances from two of Kurosawa's favourite actors, Takashi Shimura and Toshiro Mifune (the latter the first Japanese star in the West), we find musings on the nature of duty and honour, undercut by the idea that the world is no longer secure and it is only in our own humanity that we find truth – a theme dealt with even more profoundly in ***Rashomon*** and linked by some commentators to the psychological trauma of the atom bomb attacks. ***The Seven Samurai***, widely regarded by such fans as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg **as one of the greatest ever action films**, and was also one of the first Japanese films to provoke a USA remake with ***The***





Magnificent Seven (John Sturges, USA, 1960). Other jidai-geki of Kurosawa's worth looking out for are *Yojimbo* (Japan, 1961) which was also remade in the West, firstly as *A Fistful of Dollars* (Leone, Italy/Spain, 1964) and then as *Last Man Standing* (Hill, USA, 1996). The adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* (Japan, 1957) which was also the first film to be shown at the then newly-built National Film Theatre in London.

Kurosawa and the Japanese film industry

What Kurosawa shows us is that during this period Japan's film industry was interested in **genre and high production values**. Kurosawa was very much a product of a **studio system** that had developed before the war culminating with five big studios: Toho, Nikkatsu, Daiei, Shochiku and Toei. These big players dominated production on an assembly-line principle, very much in the vertically-integrated model of Hollywood as it was then.

Once the studios were allowed by the USA occupying forces to start making period pieces and sword play movies Kurosawa found his voice. It is interesting to note that **jidai-geki had been banned since 1931** because the genre was deemed to be sympathetic towards the Emperor and often featured a **nostalgia for feudal Japan** which both the American occupation administration/forces and the military dictatorship sought to discourage.

Suzuki and the Yakuza genre

If 1950s Kurosawa is our first point of contact with this period then his art house reputation needs counterbalancing with a more populist, genre film-maker, **Seijun Suzuki**. Suzuki's two most famous films of the 1960s are unabashed genre fare focused on the **modern day (gendai-geki) inheritors of the Samurai tradition, the Yakuza or Japanese gangsters**. Their fearless loyalty to their masters and highly refined sense of honour is a watered down version of the **samurai code of Bushido** – an aspect of old Japan brought up-to-date for a new demographic – young, Westernised and urban. A smattering of scantily-clad girls, violent punch-ups, car chases and gun fights were what the new post-war audiences wanted and Nikkatsu was all too happy to provide them.

This, after all, is the era of James Bond (now a Sony franchise) and his international appeal had been felt in Japan long before Connery was dispatched to Tokyo in *You Only Live Twice* (Gilbert, USA/UK, 1967). What makes Suzuki such fun is that he clearly struggled in the generic prison of the low budget studio gangster films he was required to make (sometimes in as little as 40 days from page to screen); famously, in his last two films for Nikkatsu, he tried to subvert the genre with continuity howlers, surreal sequences, and an expressionistic mise-en-scène; any attempt at realism was scoffed at. The colour *Tokyo Drifter* (Japan, 1966) is a hoot but it is in the final excesses of *Branded to Kill* (Japan, 1967), shot in black and white as

a punishment by his dissatisfied bosses, that Suzuki allows his artistic leanings to triumph over generic conformity. The film follows a mob hitman, Number 3, on his quest to become the Number 1 hitman: the cinematic result is both baffling and beautiful in equal measure. Nothing could be more at odds with Kurosawa's weighty, meticulous observations than Suzuki's playful pop sensibility. It is little wonder that the commercially-minded Nikkatsu sacked him after *Branded to Kill* although the film has gone on to become a cult masterpiece.

The new wave independents

A final trend in Japanese cinema of this period needs exploring now. This is the arena of the **independent film-maker** which in some ways was identified in the early 1960s by Shochiku's studio heads as being representative of a **'Nuberu Bagu' or New Wave**. Most independent films required studio distribution; but in the work of **Kineto Shindo** and his eerie *Onibaba* (Japan, 1964) and the ATG (Art Theatre Guild) financed *Funeral Parade of Roses* (Matsumoto, Japan, 1969) we find alternative voices finding expression outside the studio system. These voices are neither revered art house fare nor pop culture excess but rather something in between – **sexy, violent, undoubtedly arty but also subversive**, in both cinematic and cultural ways, and thus deserving the nickname **New Wave**.

Onibaba is an independently-financed, feminist debunking of male war-mongering, which focuses on two peasant women and



Seven Samurai
(1954) d. Akira
Kurosawa
Credit: Toho/The
Kobal Collection
Lost in Translation
images courtesy of
image.net

their struggle for survival in a strife-torn world. Preying on injured samurai who wander into the tall reed beds, where the women live like animals in an oven-hot hovel, they kill the stricken warriors, strip them of their armour for selling later and dump their bodies in a pit. This is a marvellous **indictment of the jidai-geki's male romanticism** and also **gives women a strong voice** – a reference to the emergence of the liberated women of the 1960s. The sexual scenes in the film are both graphic and sensual with depictions of aggressive female sexuality and nudity and would certainly have given the censors in the UK palpitations.

The film also focuses on the plight of the working classes and like another of Shindo's films, *The Naked Island* (Japan, 1960), can be read as a **pseudo-Marxist critique of the ruling elite – disguised in the jidai-geki genre as the samurai aristocracy**. Indeed it was partly for his leftist political leanings that Shindo was forced out of the studio system and became, through necessity, a true independent.

A New Wave classic

Finally we arrive at a more obviously New Wave independent, *Funeral Parade of Roses*. This film was the product of the **Art Theatre Guild (ATG)**, an organisation privately set up in the early 1960s to promote independent films and avant-garde culture through a small but massively influential network of ten cinemas (also doubling up as theatrical stages and exhibition spaces) around the country. Although Shochiku identified the New Wave for commercial reasons, thus allowing its directors (principally Teshigahara, Oshima and Imamura) the freedom to try and communicate to a new demographic, it was the ATG which really advanced the new spirit of film making. As a result, *Funeral Parade of Roses* is unashamedly driven by a desire to shock both cinematically and thematically. It is an **art film which documents the then little known sub-culture of transvestism and homosexual clubs in downtown Tokyo**. The film's focus is on a female impersonator, Peter, and observes in both a realist and experimental style his rivalries, his search for love and family, and his counter-culture lifestyle with his pot-smoking, intellectual friends. This is an avant-garde film that documents a period of intense social meltdown when student politics across the globe became radical, with protests and demos the norm. However, it is also a film about love and is even a reworking of the Oedipus story of Ancient Greece. *Funeral Parade*



of Roses is a riot and a fitting end to our overview of this fascinating period of Japanese cinema. As the industry staggered into the 70s unable to stem the haemorrhaging flow of audiences now drawn to TV and the pachinko parlours, Nikkatsu developed its soft porn 'pink-eiga' style and the ATG ran into financial difficulties finally closing in 1975. That Japanese cinema subsequently reinvented itself is clear, and the topic for another article.

A national cinema?

To conclude then let's revisit the Awarding Body's rubric and answer its final query: **can the concept of a 'national cinema' be usefully applied to Japan from 1950-1970?**

I would argue that it most certainly can. The waves of director/auteurs that have made this period famous beyond Japan's shores clearly indicate some kind of national ground swell. The **classic 'art-house' period of Kurosawa, Ozu and Mizoguchi** came to an end when in 1959 the studio system in Japan began to unravel and studios like **Nikkatsu turned to maverick talents like Suzuki to churn out genre movies for the youthful masses**. Shochiku spotted a change in the much sought-after demographic, and hailed the New Wave as a new voice for a new generation; and it is in this final tsunami of talent that **auteurs like Oshima and Matsumoto**, courtesy of independent financing (although still reliant on studio distribution), pioneered a highly revolutionary treatment and subject matter.



Throughout this period we can see the social reality of a **war-ravaged nation reaffirming its traditional identity** (Kurosawa's humanism); **reforming its identity** as the nation accelerated into prosperity and modernisation (Suzuki's pulp fiction); and, in some cases, **challenging the very notion of a national identity** itself (Shindo's and Matsumoto's radicalism). The four films noted above are then one accessible route into this rich period, and all are easily available. Many more routes exist and part of the fun that this period of national cinema offers is finding your own way through the maze.

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Bibliography

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The notebooks supplied in Eureka's 'The Masters of Cinema' DVD series is also an excellent resource for the work of Shindo and Matsumoto. Suzuki's work is available through Yume productions and Kurosawa's work is all available though the BFI.

A useful website is www.midnighteye.com