



Notebook Feature

勝手にしやがれ: Japanese Film & Media on Its Own Terms, #1: Out of Sight

Stephen Sarrazin • 21 DEC 2009

勝手にしやがれ: Japanese Film & Media On Its Own Terms

勝手にしやがれ (KATTE NI SHIYAGARE)

In François Truffaut's fourth episode of the Antoine Doinel saga, *Bed and Board* (1970), Antoine (Jean-Pierre Léaud) embarks on an affair with a Japanese woman, Kyoko (Hiroko Berghauer), culminating in a restaurant sequence in which Antoine keeps excusing himself to call his wife Christine (Claude Jade). Kyoko exits the restaurant, leaving a small piece of paper on which she's written, in kanji, 'katte ni shiyagare,' a declaration of frustration and independence, of having had enough, which can be translated politely, as above, as well as in a far more casual manner. Antoine is unable

to read this of course, it suffices that she's gone. In Truffaut's film, this subtitle appears on the shot of the brief note, 'va te faire foutre'/'go to hell'. What French audiences at the time did not know at the time was that this Japanese expression was also the Japan title of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*.

After years of having written on contemporary Japanese cinema, notably in French director Christophe Gans' wondrous magazine *HK Extreme Orient*, the film website *Objectif Cinema*, and *Cahiers du cinéma*, while having been in a position to develop relationships with directors and production companies, looking at it from what space I was allowed to enter, *Katte ni Shiyagare* seemed an appropriate title for this new column on *The Auteurs*. Japanese cinema has always done what it wanted to do, at times sabotaging its international good fortunes for the sake of quick domestic profits, shunning the effort required to export its output. It is a continually shifting industry, with severe mood swings. Recent releases increasingly reflect audience tastes and trends. An audience oddly homogeneous as both old and young, marginal and mainstream appear to like the same films.

The death knoll of the major studios in the seventies triggered an unparalleled independent production scene, in which,

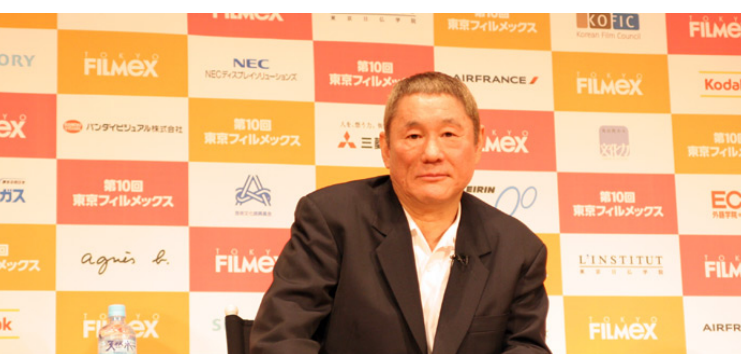
literally, anything is possible. Takeshi Kitano's *Minna-yatteruka!* [*Getting Any?*] (1995) and practically all of Takashi Miike's films attest to this anarchic streak at the heart of Japan's recent film history.

This column will look at the recent trends of Japanese cinema, new talents to look out for, while recognizing and bringing to the foreground unnoticed masters, whose groundbreaking films need to exist outside of academia and festivals. Cultdom is where it begins, not the destination.

From anime to pinku cinema, from today's established tenants of Japanese auteur cinema to those from the glorious Toei and Nikkatsu seventies, we will attempt to grasp the breadth of filmmaking culture in Japan. We will also explore the metamorphosis in its relationship to world cinema, revealed by the decreasing number of international films being distributed in this country, the big American films of course, but more significantly French films. These represented, in the eyes of Japanese critics and cinephiles, what art cinema had to be (New Wave films in Japan are to cinema what impressionism is to painting). Katte ni Shiyagare will try to address these changes through analysis, comment, and interview. Already I'm indebted to key collaborators who will be mentioned in each posting; I must however

thank Ms Petra Seimi for her constant and considerable efforts, and The Auteurs team for this joyous collaboration.

勝手にしやがれ #1: Out of Sight



Above: Takeshi Kitano. Image (c) Tokyo FilmEx.

Let the right film in: what is happening with the selection of titles for Tokyo's two major festivals?

The Tokyo film festival season has ended, with the usual overlapping events, the Tokyo International Film Festival, and Tokyo FilmEx. The big one, TIFF, with its eco green carpet, attempted to camouflage the difficult state it finds itself in, by trying to shift attention from its lackluster programs to tempting controversy, with films like [Louie Psihoyos'](#) *The Cove*, about the cruelty of dolphin fishing in Japan, and "one" major studio opening screening, in the manner of Cannes, *Avatar*, with Sigourney Weaver on hand. That's about it. TIFF has tried

every which way to draw attention away from its unfortunate place within the festival calendar; coming right after Venice and Toronto, and some months before Berlin, its competition section does not match the nature of the event, with its high profile presence in Tokyo. The most interesting winner in recent years was French director Michel Hazanavicius, for his James Bond spoof, *OSS 117* with Jean Dujardin. Although the film was picked up by a Japanese distributor, it was never released theatrically. TIFF does not make a difference. And so the numerous other selections—including a Focus on Japanese cinema, Korean cinema, a Winds of Asia program competing with FilmEx, a Women’s film event—went on struggling to find their identity(1) within this plethora of intentions. This year’s winner was the Bulgarian film *Eastern Plays*, by Kamen Kalev, lost amidst the endless comings and goings and the new Japan Media Glamour scene. TIFF is where films come to lose themselves.

More interestingly, Tokyo FilmEx tenth anniversary offered a series of panel discussions that included prominent directors such as Takeshi Kitano, Hirokazu Kore-eda and Kiyoshi Kurosawa, as well as a reflection on the future purpose of film festivals in Japan. The directors of TIFF, FilmEx, and the Yamagata Documentary festival were on hand to reflect

on the issue. Finally, perhaps the most telling Q&A event took place with fallen boy wonder, director Toshiaki Toyoda, whose 2005 *Hanging Garden* was one of the greatest Japanese films of the decade. Toyoda hadn't made a film in the last four years, busy making penance for drug possession(2).

As always, former TIFF staffer Shozo Ichiyama, now FilmEx's programming director, came up with a best of Asia selection taken from festivals such as Cannes, Pusan, including Tsai Ming-liang's *Faces* and Park Chan-wook's *Thirst*, and the usual fare of Iranian films. FilmEx did distinguish itself over the last decade through its commitment to Iranian directors, and its support of Chinese auteur Jia Zhang-ke, an Office Kitano favorite, lest we forget the key role Takeshi Kitano's production company played when Kitano had reached his creative peak.

During the talk with Kitano, who, along with Shinya Tsukamoto, initiated the return of Japanese cinema on the international circuit in the early nineties, it was noted that Kitano himself was celebrating an anniversary of his own, 20 years since his first feature, *Violent Cop*. Moderator Sadao Yamane politely skimmed on the latter half of his career, with the *Zatoichi* remake as the highlight of a period which produced a number of films underlining

the director's difficulty in distancing himself from the yakuza picture, a genre to which he'll be returning for his next project. More revealing however where his comments on the differences between working in film and television.

Television, Kitano argued, is a medium over which he rules; it's free, the spectator doesn't have to pay for anything and as long as they tune in, Kitano can do whatever he chooses to, unhindered. Whereas film consistently puts him in an area of compromise, he has to, as he puts it, listen to his lighting director, his cinematographer, etc., who are not under contract with Office Kitano, unlike several noted actors, such as Ren Osugi and Susumu Terajima, who got their breakthroughs in his films. Both went on to work with most of Japan's relevant directors of the nineties, including Shinya Tsukamoto, Katsuhito Ishii, Takashi Miike, filmmakers who are not included in FilmEx's canon of auteurs.

Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Hirokazu Kore-eda, both significant film artists in their fifties, were there to talk about which future for Japanese cinema(3).

And so it was puzzling that in light of the revival of Japanese cinema at the domestic box office, of what became of the Japanese film industry

these recent years, no young director was invited to participate in the discussion. Of the current state of affairs of Japanese cinema, themes, genres, spectators, little was said. A talented young sound designer, Yasuhiro Morinaga, a graduate of Tokyo Geidai University of Art, where Kitano is an honorary professor of the film department, and Kurosawa a member of its faculty, was there to "portray" this young generation reaching outside Japan to embrace international collaborations (he has worked with gifted artist filmmaker Chris Chong Chan Fui, from Malaysia, but has yet to collaborate on a Japanese feature, outside student films).

This theme of internationalism did however serve as a link between Kore-eda and Kurosawa, whose films have reached a larger audience abroad than in Japan, winning prizes on the festival circuit. Both K's dream of working abroad, and when they were finally able to find a foreign producer respectful of their work, it was with the producer's purpose of shooting a Japanese film, as with *Tokyo Sonata* and *Air Doll*. This lament, of being unable to make a film outside Japan, did resonate in their comments about how the gaze of the Japanese spectator is less and less exposed to classic and international cinema, and how there are far too few film schools and film centers catering to this problem. Within this context, they

argued, film festivals should have a mission, a purpose of educating that gaze.

Which leads us, briefly, to the panel on the role of film festivals in Japan, only three of which were represented...are there actually more than three? Of course, but they are few and far between; those smaller events do raise however, an issue addressed during the talk, on the festival's intent, whether to reach a fan base or to hold an event which attracts international talents and media coverage. In which case it becomes an on-going challenge in finding either Asian or international premieres. TIFF and FilmEx organizers are not naïve, they are aware of the calendar issue and realize that if a film by a major director is not ready for Venice, he/she will prefer to wait for Berlin rather than think of Tokyo. Those festivals are far more filmmaker-friendly, even though Tokyo remains, with Paris, one of the great film cities of the world, with distributors ready to spend in order to buy the new Almodóvar, etc.

Beyond the prizes and revelation of new talents, new voices and aesthetics, small events, local and regional, provide access to films which will never make it in the multiplexes or won't cut it on their satellite TVs. Outside Tokyo, not only are audiences unaware of films like *Tokyo Sonata*, it's unlikely they've heard of Kiyoshi Kurosawa. In many ways, the foreign press,

buyers and festival directors, have even more access to the works of such directors than do those local communities. FilmEx, in a partnership with UniJapan, the office for the promotion of Japanese cinema abroad, has arranged over the last several years, access to a selection of recent titles, New Cinema from Japan. The selection is based on a perception of the kind of Japanese film that could be exported.

Contemporary Japanese movies have been at the top of the Japanese box office for the last 3 years. Most films are adapted from TV dramas, mangas, and teen love stories, made by skilled young directors who are the last link on the project chain, which starts with the talent agencies and the TV networks. The pinku film industry (the narrative erotic films, the school of Koji Wakamatsu) continues to provide young directors with opportunities to have a free hand—the guideline being you can do what you want as long as there are 20 minutes of sex scenes—but such genres are seemingly not festival fare, though Kiyoshi Kurosawa's first feature was a pinku movie.

The unspoken issue within this form of amnesia, which has yet to be addressed by Japanese directors and festival organizers, is how radically the concept of 'cinéphilie' and film memory has been transformed in Japan.

Tellingly perhaps, Tomas Alfredson's *Let the Right One In* still hasn't been released in Japan. The future for now starts with forgetting.

—Tokyo, December 2009

(1) An interesting moment of loss of identity occurred as I witnessed seasoned press staff turn away a Japanese colleague who had worked with Studio Ghibli and was a former Variety Japan editor, from a foreign press club party because she didn't have a press pass.

(2) I will be posting my interview with director Toyoda and a review of his new film, *The Blood of Rebirth*, next month.

(3) Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film *Bright Future* has become FilmEx's leitmotif over the last decade. The film's title became the festival slogan and has been used in various panels over the years.