



Notebook Feature

勝手にしやがれ #2: 10 Films Writing a Decade

Stephen Sarrazin • 18 JAN 2010

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



If the nineties were the years which marked the return of Japanese cinema on the international film circuit, introducing and establishing numerous directors working in various genres who, in most cases, connected with a larger foreign than domestic audience, then the following decade could be described as an about face. Japanese films began dominating box office scores for the first time in over thirty years, with films by confirmed directors as well as emerging talents; in both cases, many of

these films, and their directors, would remain within the country. Some would on occasion be screened in festivals, but fewer still were distributed abroad theatrically.

Between 2000 and 2009, some of Japan's auteurs saw their fortunes change, either through the inability to continue making films building on, or making a relevant break with, their previous output, as with Takeshi Kitano, whose *Zatoichi* stands out among of a series of daring and flawed experiments, or Shinya Tsukamoto, whose *Vital* and *Snake in June* signaled the advent of a lyrical and prosaic tone. Kiyoshi Kurosawa experienced newfound difficulty in getting his films produced, while Shinji Aoyama kept on making films at a yearly pace, though some were never released abroad nor in Japan. Naomi Kawase became a Cannes and French favorite, Hirokazu Kore-eda saw his stock climb rapidly with his deceitful *Still Walking* in which milktoast performers pretend to do service to Ozu's legacy.

Hayao Miyazaki continued to tower over the animation art films, followed closely by Mamoru Oshii, but the decade did celebrate two other recent major figures, Satoshi Kon and Mamoru Hosoda. Hideo Nakata came and went as the horror trend lessened, Takashi Miike kept on saying yes to every offer, and Nobohiro Suwa became the most Japanese of all French

directors.

The following list is not a ten best of the decade, but rather a series of signposts and landmarks which point to the films that played a part in transforming an industry wherein nearly all films produced are indie releases, financed through a partnership made up of Tokyo's leading talent agencies, major TV networks and a committee comprised of private advertising sponsors and investors. Two major consequences of this have been: the diminishing status of the director in the creative process, who comes in as a hired gun, and: the banality and triteness of encountering performers on a daily basis, from movie to TV drama to variety show to advertising. The last decade launched the careers of countless "talentos"(1), young and cute boy-girl products, yet revealed but a handful of actors & actresses one might be eager to follow over the next ten years.

And yet, within this context, Japanese film artists, within and outside the mainstream, change the rules, come up with new strategies, and challenge spectators to come to terms with the shrinking space afforded to memory. "If no one wants to collect it, if nobody is talking about it, was it ever there in the first place?" is what contemporary audiences here seem to think. Here then are some films which stood tall.



1. *The Taste of Tea* (Katsuhito Ishii, 2005)

Katsuhito Ishii is the smiling version of the Shunji Iwai approach to filmmaking. Like Iwai before him, Ishii proved himself to be an innovative music video and commercial director, striking a relationship in the nineties with a group of entertainers known as SMAP, singers-actors-advertising icons for nearly every major brand in Japan, who have been in the media foreground for over twenty-five years. By 1998, Ishii was in position to shoot whatever he wanted as his first feature.

Sharkskin Man & Peach Hip Girl, a ground breaking adaptation of a cult manga, was the most successful domestic film of that year. In 2005, *The Taste of Tea* saw Ishii achieving the first successful fusion of Shochiku film sensibility and Japanese pop culture. He did this by bringing a family that included an anime director-mother, a father hypnotist, a record producer uncle, and a grandfather once a manga giant, all living in the rural and quiet area

of Tochigi. Ishii brought cool to the countryside, but let the pace of the area seep inside the film. *The Taste of Tea* was immensely influential in Japan, as it encouraged other young directors to decentralize the trends of Tokyo culture. It was also a hit in Europe, notably in France.

2. *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (Shunji Iwai, 2001)

One of two major directors (the other being Junji Sakamoto) who should have been huge everywhere. Iwai put himself in a position of independence early on, as a music video and commercial director, before moving briefly to TV films and creating his own production company Rockwell Eyes in the late eighties. Since then, Iwai has only made films he wrote (as well as edited and often composed the score). *All About Lily Chou-Chou* was an epic and unrelenting film centered on “hijime,” the vicious targeting and victimizing of different or weaker students. Iwai had told me back in 2001 that he sought to show that Tokyo was a hospital, full of unwell people. The film featured two outstanding young actresses, Ayumi Ito, discovered by Iwai for his 1996 *Swallowtail Butterfly*, and another Iwai revelation, Yu Aoi, who has since become one of Japan’s more original and refreshing performers. It should be noted that Iwai was among the first directors to hire TV drama stars as main actors in his films, to secure additional financing; he proved that

when a director worked hard enough, he could get inspired work from talents. This method has since been used by virtually every auteur in Japan.

Lily Chou-Chou's cinematography was by Iwai's key collaborator, one of Japan's greatest directors of photography, Noboru Shinoda, who passed away in 2004.


3. *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World* (Isao Yukisada, 2004)

Yukisada began his career learning filmmaking by working on independent erotic/pinku films, before becoming Shunji Iwai's assistant director. *Calling Out Love* was not only his breakthrough film, it was one of the biggest hits of the decade for Japanese cinema. Adapted from a high school romance novel, it launched a wave of nostalgia films, of young adults barely entering the world of autonomy and responsibility and already yearning for their teen years. Yukisada makes a masterful use of the novel's flashback structure, when two students fell in love, corresponding through recorded cassette messages. Moving through cold blue Tokyo to the typhoons of Kyushu onto Australia's sun drenched outback, it manages to be a melodrama of hues and textures (it was one of cinematographer Noboru Shinoda's last films). The film succeeds moving beyond the

nostalgia, pointing to the terror of adulthood that informs so many of Japan's current releases.

4. *Bright Future* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa. 2004)

Kurosawa, who had an excellent year with *Tokyo Sonata*, is, along with Takeshi Kitano, a specialist of the “fatherless” theme which haunted Japanese contemporary cinema for over twenty years. The absent father would often be compensated by the presence of a reluctant role model, played many times by Kôji Yakusho. What was especially striking about *Tokyo Sonata* was the return of the Japanese father in the home, unemployed, and the trauma entailed. *Bright Future*, hailed as a brilliant failure when screened in competition at Cannes, served as a shroud on this social sub-genre, laying it to rest once and for all. Screen rebels Tadanobu Asano and Jô Odagiri play co-workers stuck with dead-end jobs. When their loser boss tries to bond with them, Asano snaps and takes a bat to him and his family. Enter his father, a man who salvages all forms of electro-junk, played by the legendary Tatsuya Fuji, from Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*. Still unable to connect with his jailed son, he lets Odagiri's character make a bid for the part. The first painful steps in trying, and failing, to achieve a semblance of family.





5. *Hanging Garden* (Toshiaki Toyoda, 2005)

Possibly the best directed film of the decade, Toyoda, who recently returned to film after a four-year hiatus (following a drug bust), used the analogy of the hanging garden, the "rootless" plants in the air, to paint this family portrait in which the mother sets one rule to live by: when they manage to find the time to all sit down and eat together, there should be no secrets between them, all should be said. But though the dinner table exchanges can be biting, secrets abound, with the husband's abusive mistress making her way into his home as she becomes the son's tutor, while the daughter, let down by sex with her boyfriend, keeps going to the same love hotel with a series of strange men. Still, the mother, with a mystery of her own, keeps them together. Kyoko Koizumi (awarded best actress in Japan for her performance by the Japan Film Academy) would go on to play a similar figure in *Tokyo Sonata*. Here she tends to the garden as Toyoda nurtures the film through a meticulous direction of actors and a confident selection of

camera movements that find their way to the heart this family.



6. *Memories of Matsuko* (Tetsuya Nakashima, 2006)

The role of a lifetime for actress Miki Nakatani (also in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Loft* and Hideo Nakata's *Ring*). Nakashima, who directed *Kamikaze Girls* (2004), forged a bitter manga musical with this tale of Matsuko, a charming young woman for whom everything goes wrong at every turn, until she is found dead and destitute. Using the *Citizen Kane* structure, Matsuko's nephew tries to put together the pieces of his aunt's life. The near cynical use of bright bold colors and upbeat pop music give the film a Sirkian flavor. But its notable achievement was in finding the filmic means to translate manga narrative tropes to cinema, through micro stream of consciousness sequences in which characters pause to imagine how their lives could be, borrowing from every possible media form while fully realizing audiences are savvy enough to keep

up with those furious shifts in tone. Nakashima succeeds in maintaining this frenzied pace from beginning to end. Think Jean-Pierre Jeunet on speed.

7. *Millennium Actress* (Satoshi Kon, 2001)

Tekkon Kinkreet (Michael Arias, 2006)

Satoshi Kon, who emerged from Katsuhiro Otomo's entourage, rapidly established himself as a major figure of anime art films with *Perfect Blue* in 1998. *Millennium Actress* confirmed him as an auteur, its screenplay undoubtedly one of the strongest of the decade. Inspired by the destruction of the legendary Shochiku studios in Ofuna, which did little to preserve objects, posters (few film institutions bothered), photographed and documented by Kon, *Millennium Actress* is loosely based on a cinephile fantasy consisting of finding Yasujiro Ozu's muse, Setsuko Hara, who retired from cinema after his death. The great actress, nearing ninety, who still lives in Kamakura, the setting of most of Ozu's post-war films, became a sort of Garbo figure, and her privacy has been respected to this day. In Kon's film, she becomes Chiyoko Fujiwara. A former studio employee, now a celebrated TV documentary producer, has located her and she grants him his request for an interview, in which Kon retraces the major eras of Japanese cinema,

through thematic links and formal jump cuts, from the personal to the professional, with profoundly moving grace and elegance.

Tekkon Kinkreet was another striking anime film of the decade, produced by Studio 4C (helmed by Koji Morimoto, another Otomo collaborator), and adapted from the cult manga by Taiyo Matsumoto. Studio 4C's style is as distinct as that of Hayao Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli, Mamoru Oshii's Production IG, and Kon's Madhouse.

What makes *Tekkon* stand out in this list is its director, American Michael Arias, a CG software wizard who had worked with James Cameron, Isao Takahata, the Wachowski brothers, etc., who has lived in Japan for nearly twenty years and is among the very few foreign directors able to get inside the industry. He didn't fare as well with his 2009 live action release *Heaven's Door*, also made and produced in Japan. *Tekkon's* voice talents included Iwai's revelation Yu Aoi and actor Kazunari Ninomiya, a famous JPop star, seen in Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima*, a sign of trust on the part of notoriously prudent Tokyo agents.

8. *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001)

Takashi Miike directed nearly forty films between 2000 and 2009, as well as episodes from TV series and the 6 part mini-series MPD Psycho, so this alone should warrant a place for

him on this list. Miike, who never read a script he didn't like, told me his biggest fear was that the phone might stop ringing some day and there would be no project to get him out of the house. As a director, he alternates between commissions he cares about, shoots with a paycheck, and projects he's eager to direct. He cared about *Ichi the Killer*, based Hideo Yamamoto's manga about a psychotic hitman, for which he assembled a cast that included Nao Omori as Ichi, Tadanobu Asano as a sado-masochistic yakuza out to get Ichi, and director Shinya Tsukamoto as the man who controls Ichi. Many of Miike's films find him relying on a well seasoned system which sees the director saving his trademark furious virtuoso flourish for the final sequences. In *Ichi the Killer*, Miike abandoned reason, as he'd done with *Dead or Alive*, and took the plunge from the opening, emerging at the end drenched in every manner of bodily fluid through a series of maniacal orchestrated scenes of murder, rape, torture and occasional levity. A genuine manifesto of anarchic cinema that recalled the edgier days of Japanese filmmaking in the seventies.

9. *Vibrator* (Ryuichi Hiroki, 2003)

Ryuichi Hiroki is the real thing, a truly independent director who began his career making erotic films, a world which has continued to echo in the films he made after

leaving the pinku production system.

He is proof that erotic cinema Japan is often a stepping stone to other directing opportunities. *Vibrator* is a road movie, moving between despair and desire. Rei, a rootless free-lance writer played by the striking Shinobu Terajima (who teamed up again with Hiroki for *It's Only Talk* in 2005), is a woman so disconnected from to her surroundings that her only sensory link to the material world is the vibration of her cell phone in her pocket. She meets Okabe (Nao Omori, from *Ichi the Killer*) a solitary truck driver in no hurry to return home to his wife, and embarks with him on a journey with no destination. The characters are not wandering across Japan, but simply seizing the opportunity to feel something, inside the truck, along the way. The bold sex scenes in the truck cabin quickly move beyond representations of arousal, stating instead the characters starving for a feeling of proximity, a soothing balm to lessen the gnawing sensation of isolation. Like Patrice Chereau's *Intimacy*, with better weather.



10. *Kamome Diner* (Naoko Oigami, 2006)

Although Naomi Kawase remains the most celebrated woman director from Japan, the last decade saw several other women filmmakers appear on the scene, including Miwa Nishikawa, a former Hirokazu Kore-eda assistant who shot the remarkable *Yureru* in 2006; and Nami Iguchi, who worked with Kiyoshi Kurosawa, was praised for her 2007 film *Don't Laugh At My Romance*.

If Kawase has centered her films around the region she lives in—in and around the city of Nara—exploring themes similar to those of Kore-eda, —how to go on living after the loss of a loved one—producing an exceptionally grounded body of work, then it can be said that Naoko Oigami's films hold a similar geographical coherence. Her characters, however, need to move around, to truly distance themselves from what they experienced before. Oigami is a far more minimalist director than Kawase, with more static shots and clean compositions within the frame. The people we encounter in her tales of psychological exile define a social trend that made its way to Japan during the last fifteen years or so, with musician Ryuichi Sakamoto as its poster boy, a lifestyle imported from Scandinavia termed LOHAS (lifestyle of health and sustainability), and involving a generation nearing forty and above who decides to break with the pattern of the

Japanese professional life. In *Kamome Diner*, a woman has opened a small bistro in Helsinki, Finland, and is surprised to encounter two more women from Japan, with whom she bonds as Finnish customers become part of their lives. Some recent Japanese films were shot in other Asian countries, notably Junji Sakamoto's *Children of Darkness* (in Thailand, where Kawase also directed her *Nanayomachi*), few however dared to venture out to Europe. *Kamome Diner* was a sweet, kind, courageous film.

If I were to add #11 then it would be Junji Sakamoto's *Chameleon* (2008). As I mentioned above, Sakamoto, along with Shunji Iwai, should have enjoyed the same level of success as many of his peers. An elegant and classical director, Sakamoto's *Chameleon* was one of the best and most unusual low-keyed action films with elaborate car chases that relied on real sound and cutting, doing away with revved up ambient music. His 2000 film *Face* would also deserve a spot here.

Two other notable developments took place between 2000 and 2009 in Japan's film world. To my considerable joy, the films and directors of Nikkatsu's Roman Porno genre were re-examined and re-evaluated by Japanese critics and film historians. Books and studies were published, retrospectives organized in key

Tokyo art house theaters, and the dvd publisher Geneon released nearly 200 Roman Porno titles (Nikkatsu made over 1100). In 2010, I will be posting my in-depth interview with surviving Roman Master, Masaru Konuma.

On a more worrying note, young Japanese audiences have returned to an insular view of culture, watching fewer foreign films, listening almost exclusively to Japanese pop music, becoming less eager to learn foreign languages and travel abroad. The number of foreign films, notably those outside America, dropped since 2004, as more art house cinemas closed down in and around Tokyo. Domestic rivalry remains a common theme inside Japanese cinema, but competition with the outside is far too stressful. Mamoru Oshii, after seeing James Cameron's *Avatar*, mentioned how relieved he was, that even if he had ten years ahead of him he could never achieve something like that, and this was a soothing fact to live with.

Tokyo, January 2010.

(1) *Talents* is the term used in Japan to describe all manner of contracted celebrities encountered simultaneously in advertising, music, television and movies.