



Notebook Festival

勝手にしやがれ #4: Resistance is Futile (Post-Berlin)

Stephen Sarrazin • 10 MAR 2010

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



As Japan enters another season of social-economic woes which fail to find a filmic voice to address the state of affairs, instead releasing a number of vacuous titles, the recent Berlinale rewards seem to further underscore things. Two veteran filmmakers, the figurehead of Japanese independent cinema Koji Wakamatsu, and mainstream helmer of nearly fifty Tora-san films, Shochiku favorite Yoji Yamada,

summoned us to take a closer look at the country's film industry. Each took home awards; prize for best actress was awarded to Shinobu Terajima, starring in Wakamatsu's *Caterpillar*, the tale of a village wife expected to care for a husband who returns from war a mutilated hero, and a lifetime achievement award went to Yamada, on hand with his latest tear-fest, *Ototo (About Her Brother)*, in which a man abuses his older sister's generosity, until she cuts him off, and discovers him later dying in a hospital.

The transparent yet contagious charm of Werner Herzog's jury prizes in Berlin perhaps found its full expression in having an event such as Berlin finally recognize Koji Wakamatsu, the one director who, with the late Shohei Imamura, never gave up on his anger at Japanese society. Aberrant, deviant sexuality, along with radical politics, has been a cornerstone of the director's cinema for nearly fifty years. *Caterpillar*, with its stellar cast, and unusually rich (by Wakamatsu standards) production values, is in sharp contrast to his previous film, the remarkable *United Red Army* (2007). His raging exploration of sexuality as a political duty is served this time by an inspired performance by Shinobu Terajima, an actress who has never shied away from eroticism in art cinema, notably in her collaboration with another pinku

director turned auteur, Ryuichi Hiroki, with whom she collaborated on two outstanding Japanese films of the last decade, *Vibrator* (2003), and *It's Only Talk* (2005) (1). Meanwhile, Yoji Yamada, a gifted director of consensual films over a career spanning a similar length as Wakamatsu's, worked with two distinct generations of actresses for his latest, *Ototo*—the wondrous Yu Aoi and stalwart Sayuri Yoshinaga. Kon Ichikawa's own *Ototo* (1960), which weaves a similar tale about too much proximity between siblings, still fares better than Yamada's nonetheless darker than usual release.

Yet despite these two awards, as soon as skater Mao Asada hit the ice in Vancouver, the dizzying speed with which the media turned away from the film accolades, felt more like a dismissal than an interruption. Things seemed back to normal in Tokyo on March 1st when a program of classic modernist films held at Nikkei Hall, *Femmes@Tokyo*, devoted to French actresses, was launched with Bunuel's *Belle de jour* with Catherine Deneuve on hand. In a conversation moderated by an eminent Japanese translator and professor at Tokyo University, he told Ms. Deneuve that even when he was growing up in his remote village, unable to see European films, he still heard that Deneuve was the most beautiful woman in the world and Alain Delon

the most handsome man, to the delight of smiling faces in a packed hall where one was hard-pressed to locate youthful spectators. We'll see later this month if they show up at UniFrance's French Film Festival, also held in Tokyo, this time with Jane Birkin, as festival president, following on Juliette Binoche's footsteps (2). This event functions mainly as a promotion tool for a diminishing number of French films already acquired by distributors and scheduled for release in 2010, along with a few others UniFrance hopes will find a buyer. At this time of writing, Jacques Audiard's extraordinary *Un Prophete*, still hasn't been picked up, in spite of the nine Cesars it just won. Perhaps an Oscar will make a difference. It did wonders in 2009 for Yojiro Takita's *Departures*.

(1) Back in 2007, the French Embassy in Tokyo, and art-house distributor and theater Uplink, organized a selection of short works in film and video entitled Extreme Love, curated by Nicole Brenez, experimental film expert and professor in Paris. I was moderator one evening with Philippe Grandrieux, Ryuichi Hiroki, and actress Shinobu Terajima on stage.. Even back then, Ms. Terajima commented on how the Japanese mainstream film industry was in the midst of perceiving her, and thus cast her, as the mother, or older sister of a younger performer. Yet

directors operating outside that world, like Hiroki and Wakamatsu, have not abandoned talent for the sake of eternal teendom.

(2) I'll be commenting further on this event later this month.

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ABOUT HER BROTHER
Yôji Yamada