



## Notebook Feature

# 勝手にしやがれ #5. The Stake: Festival du Film Français au Japon, March 18-22

Stephen Sarrazin • 25 APR 2010

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



French cinema has enjoyed a rather long shelf life in Japan, having represented for several decades the largest number of imported foreign titles, after American releases, and playing a significant role as cultural model. Japan had its own New Wave and for a brief period its own edition of *Cahiers du cinéma*. For more than twenty years, the official organization for the promotion of French

cinema abroad, Unifrance, through its French film festival, held in Yokohama from 1993 to 2006 and in Tokyo these last four years, has attempted to feel the pulse of Japanese audiences, testing their appetites, feeding them a bit of old and new (1).

As with most foreign film markets, Japan's perception of French filmmaking centers firstly on the New Wave and its heirs, then the "auteurs maudits" who don't fit in comfortably with a *Cahiers* aesthetic, and finally the glamorous European film stars. The Japanese film industry may have mimicked all of these following the decline of the major production studios, but by all accounts there are few Japanese auteurs under 40 who have appeared of late, no auteur maudit like Shuji Terayama although several aspire to it, most notably the gifted Sono Sion. And the last movie star to speak of was Ken Takakura, the only actor to rival Alain Delon, a god in his own right, and mind, across Asia.

This year's edition of the festival continued to provide a taste of each, with Arnaud Desplechin and his wondrous *A Christmas Tale*, and former *Cahiers* critic Mia Hansen-Løve's tribute to producer Humbert Balsan, *The Father of My Children*; the rebel figures were especially well accounted for, with Gaspar Noe's *Enter the Void*, shot in Japan, Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch*,

or in a less threatening light directors Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet* and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Micmacs à tire-larigot*. As for the big stars, it is more prudent to say that the landscape has changed in France, a new territory made up of new performers, unexplored by many spectators in Japan. Jane Birkin was on hand as festival president (following Juliette Binoche who had followed Sophie Marceau etc.), and perhaps the most familiar figure in Tokyo was Catherine Deneuve ( who starred in Desplechin's *A Christmas Tale*, which got a full house at the Shibuya EuroSpace theater, on the night the director and lead actor Mathieu Amalric were on hand to talk about the film).

Other less stellar films by fine directors included the disappointing *Les regrets* by Cedric Kahn, and Laurent Cantet's 2008 Cannes winner, *The Class*, finally released later this year in Tokyo.

The latter was a key exception within this selection, revealing the actual face of France as a multi-ethnic/cultural canvas. The "Frenchness" aura has been redefined within France's cinema, and several major films of the last twenty-five years have traced this change, from Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* in which a young postman admires an African-American opera singer and falls for a French-Vietnamese girl, to Mathieu Kassovitz's *La haine* and its

northern African kids out of place in Paris, to Abdel Kechiche's *L'esquive* and its diverse communities connecting through a love of theater...

But this has long ceased to mean much of anything for Japan's new generation, for whom the French aura doesn't fly anymore, having forfeited much of its appeal by resting on waning laurels. Distributors are faced with this reality, caught between a mission to introduce new French directors to Japan, while selecting films that must bring in profits, including in the economically fragile art house cinemas. And this explains the diminishing number of French films every year. Japan's major distributors demonstrated over the course of the last decade that they just didn't know how to promote the new genre directors from France, such as Christophe Gans, Louis Leterrier and Mathieu Kassovitz, who have all worked with Hollywood, nor maintain a clear strategy in defining the shifts in the work of directors like François Ozon or Olivier Assayas, who in spite of being a relatively frequent visitor to Japan, has had few films released here, and scored only with *Irma Vep*. They missed the boat with filmmakers like Bruno Dumont, Xavier Giannoli, and Christophe Honoré, while never understanding directors like Alain Resnais and Claude Chabrol, who in spite of Japan's

adulation of New Wave cinema, were never championed as they should have been.

The *Cahiers* legacy and its defense of mise-en-scène endures in small pockets of cinephiles, many of whom hearken back to the books and courses of professor Shigehiko Hasumi, of Tokyo University, who enjoyed great influence during the eighties. They continue to support film societies, notably and naturally those of the different France-Japan Institutes (Institut Franco-Japonais), who either embrace or struggle with this state of things (2), reflecting on whether to neglect or promote directors outside that rim. And they flock every year to the Tokyo FilmEx Festival.

And while such institutes are also partners of the festival (the Unifrance office in Tokyo is located in one of the buildings of the French Institute), the festival has never engaged in debate over its inefficiency or reluctance to address what contemporary French cinema is. Amazingly, no members of the former *Cahiers Japon* had attended Raymond Bellour's talks in Tokyo last Fall, during the course of his first visit to Japan; it should also be said that critics representing other French film publications, besides Bellour's own *Trafic*, have never received an invitation to participate in examining what makes for French cinema today: no *Positif*, *Vertigo*, nor publisher Leo

Scheer's sadly missed *Cinema*.

Furthermore, Audiard's *A Prophet* has yet to find a Tokyo distributor, while another talented director and former *Cahiers* critic Nicolas Saada, was completely ignored by Unifrance. His first feature *Espion(s)* starring Guillaume Canet, Geraldine Pailhas and Stephen Rea, was a 2009 French hit and was nominated in the best first feature category at this year's Cesar ceremony in Paris.

But Pedro Costa's documentary about actress-chanteuse Jeanne Balibar, *Ne change rien*, will be screened in the coming weeks; both director and actress have been anointed by professor Hasumi and director Nobohiro Suwa. This feels in many ways like a retelling of Tobe Hooper's eternal adaptation of Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*, with Japanese critics playing James Mason and French cinema as the vampire, moved from house to house by a devout disciple posing as an antiques dealer. French cinema has risen again and again, from its post New Wave auteurs like Jean Eustache, Philippe Garrel, André Téchiné, and Benoît Jacquot, to those who came out of advertising and music vidéos, from Beneix to Michel Gondry, onto the Femis stars, including François Ozon and Arnaud Desplechin. Few audiences and critics are as harsh or proud in their appreciation of their film industry as the French are. But they've yet to

strike the stake through the ghoul that haunts  
this place and its ever rising sun...and free  
Japan's gaze. The days of heroic independent  
distributors from Japan heading for France in  
search of treasure are long gone, and French  
cinema is now moving in one direction. Où est  
Buffy?

(1) Japan has a similar structure called...  
UniJapan.

(2) The policy changes according to each  
Institute's film societies. I can attest to the  
openness of such structures, as they program  
films by directors who've never been associated  
with the New Wave and after, while also letting  
critics select films they've never seen (or  
understood in the original French) simply by  
virtue of a connection to the New Wave, and try  
to wing it during the accompanying lecture.