



Notebook Feature

勝手にしやがれ #7. Euro-Space or Lack Thereof

Stephen Sarrazin • 11 DEC 2010

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



Part 1: Where Did We Go Wrong?

As the number of art house theaters and distributors diminishes year after year, what remains of Tokyo's once vibrant and vital international film scene?

One of the most eccentric film releases this Fall in Tokyo has been *Shikedai no Elevator*, directed by Akira Ogata. The film is a remake of Louis

Malle's 1958 film *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Elevator to the Gallows*), and is produced by Kadokawa Eiga with approval from the director's son, Manuel Malle. Akira Ogata, former assistant-director to Sogo Ishii, fared better with earlier leaner and more personal titles, including *The Milkwoman* (2005) and *Boy's Choir* (2000). It's likely this was his ticket to a wider audience, as the film is cluttered with a cast mostly coming from TV dramas and commercials, including insufferable leads Michiko Kichise and Hiroshi Abe, standing in for Jeanne Moreau and Maurice Ronet, which should suffice to reveal the utter absurdity of the film's endeavor.

At a time when Japan is growing tired of "listening" to foreign voices at the movies (1), it opts increasingly for dubbed versions of foreign films, rather than submit to subtitles. The dismissal here of this singular sound distinction, the throaty promise in Jeanne Moreau's voice, the utter elegance and nonchalance of Ronet's dandy tones, further weakens this trip the gallows. There is no subtlety to the aural atmosphere of *Shikedai*; it is noisy and vulgar. Blessedly, Miles Davis' music is gone, his sleep unbothered.

Shikedai no Elevator's one redeeming meta-trait, however, is that it sheds light on a current film distribution ailment afflicting Japan, the

soft fading out of European films in cinemas. Ogata's film posits itself as a trial-test for the substitution of a European original by a domestic ersatz. It carries with it a French aura at a particular cultural moment, when the real thing has lost much of its punch on the distribution market. During the recent edition of the Tokyo International Film Festival a panel discussion took place addressing this issue from an international perspective. International critics from France, Germany and the U.K. were oddly assembled to discuss the diminishing number of European films in Japan's movie theaters. Why no Japanese critic took part in this exchange could be explained by the size of the audience, which barely numbered twenty members: they simply aren't interested. Figures were quoted and stated, notably the significant decrease of art house theaters and foreign film distributors in Tokyo over the last decade, and the low profit ratio, after the costs of buying the rights to a film, printing subtitled copies, creating a marketing campaign...all while multiplex cinemas blossomed across the country. How this came to be, however, failed to be examined—why did a new generation of spectators fail to pursue a cinephile tradition that had existed in Tokyo since the sixties?

Jean-Michel Frodon, former editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma*, professed that the box

office success of recent Japanese films stood as a reclaimed moral imperative. When a national audience bonds once again with its culture, here its film industry, supporting its own voice, then this merits celebration. Frodon added that the rise of Asian cinema in general did much to explain this state of things; he did remind the audience, however, that the quality of films being produced and watched should matter as much as its rewards for the producers. There lies the rub; Japan has revealed fewer directors of note over the last two decades. Which is not to say that they don't exist, rather that the production system doesn't bother with them, relying instead on proven veterans, or hiring young "professionals" more concerned with the job than with vision or the... weight of Japan's extraordinary film legacy (2). They are the ones helming the hits.

French cinema, which represented nearly 30% of other distributed foreign films, after American releases, has particularly suffered from this relocation of the director's aura. France's national film promotion agency Unifrance organizes a yearly showcase to promote its own hits, bringing films directed by confirmed and emerging directors, and a contingent of stars led by a member of acting "nobility," from Catherine Deneuve to Juliette Binoche.

The Spring event strives to make a dent in the market, but so far achieved results that are few and far between. Works of those rare remaining auteurs recognized in Japan have generally been picked up in earlier markets, and so the films of Jean-Pierre Jeunet and François Ozon stand tall (Ozon's two last films, *Ricky* and *Potiche*, will be released months apart in Tokyo), while talents of the last decade, like Christophe Honoré, Xavier Giannoli, Alain Guiraudie, and Philippe Grandrieux, have been ignored. Meanwhile, film societies set up by French-Japan Institutes (l'Institut Franco-Japonais, under the tutelage of France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs) maintain French cinema in an aging *nouvelle vague* strajh jacket, MC'd by critics and professors from Japan who believe France accomplished its cinematic destiny with the New Wave (3).

But at least some French films make it to cinemas. Germany and Italy hold their own respective film festivals, attracting a noteworthy audience, sufficient for the event to have its yearly reprieve, but also providing the "one time only" opportunity to see these works in Tokyo. This lavish and invaluable film dialogue between Europe and Japan has gone on for decades, yet now appears to be in the hands of those who clearly aren't speaking the same language.

(1) See these articles in
Japanese: [one](#), [two](#), [three](#), [four](#).

(2) In an upcoming interview, I will be discussing this issue of locating Japan's new directors, and their dependence on various forms of French assistance, with the founders and directors of Tokyo FilmEx festival (made up of independent Asian art films from Asia).

(3) Over the last thirty years, Japan produced two leading figures who exercised considerable influence over the presence of French cinema and French film methodologies in Japan. The first was professor Shigehiko Hasumi, now retired, a Francophile who studied in Europe, who counted some of Japan's most talented contemporary directors among his students, and who became president of Tokyo University during the nineties. His books laid the groundwork for a generation of writers and critics appearing in the eighties, before the waning interest afforded to art house cinema at the turn of this century, here in Tokyo. His heirs now seek to exist among the ruins of a critical arena held once more within the perimeters of academia. The need for "presence" is such that even in publications such as Nobody, a contemporary magazine about international art cinema, editors place

their names on the top pages of interviews, an “edited by” tagline, rather than at the closing of a piece.

The other key individual is the intensely active Kenzo Horikoshi, founder of Euro Space, which started out as one of the pioneers of art house cinema in Tokyo in the early eighties showing films through its own distribution system. Euro-Space explains on its website that as “more and more films are distributed to larger outside theaters, our business is expanding to production, international co-production (of several French films), and development of films. The Film School of Tokyo was established in 1997. We opened a new theatre in January 2006” (located in Shibuya’s ‘love hotel’ area). Distributor, producer, film school director, friend to Tokyo’s film societies, Kenzo Horikoshi is one of Japan’s tastemakers when it comes to European cinema. However, while Hasumi did produce a generation of followers, it’s more difficult to conceive of someone who will have the same breadth of influence as Horikoshi. Takashi Asai, who founded the other notable distribution/production structure Uplink in 1987 (which co-produced several Derek Jarman films), whose theater is located not too far from EuroSpace, remains active and rebellious and edgier, daring to organize a retrospective of French director Philippe Grandrieux’s films back