

Book Review

Inuhiko Yomota: *What is Japanese Cinema?: A History*. Translated by Philip Kaffen. New York: Columbia University Press. 2019. 248pp. ISBN 978-0231191623

Readers interested in a historical overview of Japanese cinema can choose from several options. Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie's *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (1965) remains seminal, despite the authors' critical and at times dismissive point of view, one heavily influenced by an unreflective Western outlook. Donald Richie continued to write and publish on the history of Japanese cinema until his death. *A New History of Japanese Cinema: 100 Years of Narrative Film* by Isolde Standish (2005) offers a more recent and academically grounded alternative. Inuhiko Yomota, an established scholar in the field, offers another detailed opus on the history of Japanese cinema, originally aimed at Japanese readers. Now, for the first time — almost 20 years after its original publication in Japanese and 12 years after its translation into German — it is available in English, translated by Philip Kaffen under the title *What is Japanese Cinema?*.

The English title is at first a surprise, as the original book was titled *Nihon eiga-shi 100 nen* [A 100-year History of Japanese Cinema]. Most of the book follows the structure one would expect, separating the history of Japanese film into sections, including early beginnings, early golden age, pre-war and wartime cinema production under the national film law, and post-war film production under the control of the American occupation force. The author offers the reader information about the development of film studios and the historical and cultural background he regards as relevant to understanding different productions.

The historical narrative ends with a somewhat bleak chapter focusing on the development of Japanese cinema up to 2011. It expresses a pessimistic view of the decline in quality of Japanese film (in comparison to what Yomota considers the much more creatively successful Korean cinema). Naturally, recent developments, such as the international success of Kore-eda Hirokazu, discussions about the treatment of Japanese society, and attacks on the director as “anti-Japanese”, are not covered (although they would have been interesting to read about). It would have been interesting to hear Yomota's views on this last topic, as he makes his liberal and anti-nationalist views clear throughout the text, such as when he discusses the relevance of cinema to Japanese nationalism.

While the book was never intended to present a comprehensive definition of Japanese cinema, the title indicates a central question that is addressed repeatedly throughout the book. The relevance of this question is addressed in a useful introduction that encourages the reader to consider the idea of “Japanese cinema” as a national cinema developed in isolation from the rest of the world or as independent from its global historical background.

The book covers various topics that address this central question. These topics include the relevance of stardom, the historical development of the studio system and its direct impact on the films produced by the various studios, and control of film production through censorship. Cinema production in Japan's colonies until 1945, the afterlife of these production backgrounds for domestic and transnational film production and the reception of Japanese cinema abroad are also discussed. Throughout the book, Yomota, again and again, engages with concepts that

are relevant to film studies, such as when he explains the success of Japanese cinema in the European film festival circuit of the 1950s in the context of the emerging concept of auteurism.

Yomota also addresses academic contributions to the discourse on Japanese cinema by Western authors, such as Noel Burch and Aaron Gerow. In discussing these contributions, Yomota avoids being drawn into film criticism. He does not categorise filmmakers as good or bad, nor does he dismiss popular films and historical phenomena, such as the benshi film narrator of the silent film area, as inferior to the Western concept of silent film (all of which is evident in Anderson and Richie's study).

While none of the questions Yomota asks or topics he addresses is new or surprising to an expert reader, and critics may feel that some explanations fall short of providing convincing depth, these attributes contribute to the book's accessibility and value to newcomers. The excellent translation by Philip Kaffen also enhances the readability of the text. The book successfully succeeds in raising relevant issues and to convey information about historical and cultural backgrounds. It will help both newcomers to and students of Japanese cinema to engage with the themes, genres and personalities of Japanese film, either on their own or in the context of a university classroom.

References

- Anderson, Joseph and Donald Richie. *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*. Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1965.
- Standish, Isolde. *A New History of Japanese Cinema: 100 Years of Narrative Film*. New York: Continuum, 2005.

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