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# Directory of World Cinema: Japan (Volume One)

Edited by John Berra, Intellect, 2010

Reviewed by Andrew Dorman

The first offering in Intellect's *Directory of World Cinema* series selects Japan as its subject, a worthy starting-point given the ongoing scholarly and popular interest in Japanese national film and its status as one of the most widely-discussed 'world cinemas'. Taking into consideration the diversity of the subject, the text is a useful addition to the deluge of existing material, providing readers with an overview of a rich cinematic history and a reassessment of the current state of the industry in the wake of anime and J-Horror's absorption into the popular culture.

*Directory of World Cinema: Japan* offers a revision of contemporary Japanese film at a time when attention has shifted onto other East Asian territories and prominent filmmakers like Takeshi Kitano, Takashi Miike, and Kiyoshi Kurosawa are transitioning away from the genres that established them internationally. Featuring contributions from numerous scholars, including William M. Tsutsui, Mark Schilling and Colette Balmain, this volume seeks to move beyond the standard anime-J-Horror image of modern Japanese cinema, without neglecting these areas outright. Readers are duly provided with a culturally-specific insight into over 150 films and their attendant 'Japaneseness', with brief reviews of both obscure and canonised works arranged into convenient genre sections, ranging from *chambara eiga*/samurai films and *yakuza* cinema to *Nuberu Bagu*/the Japanese New Wave and *Pinku eiga*/pink films. Each film is covered by a short synopsis followed by some criticism and analysis. Although rather brief for those familiar with Japanese cinema, these sections should prove accessible for newcomers to the subject.

In addition, specially-featured sections highlight the oeuvres of prominent directors like Akira Kurosawa, Kitano and Satoshi Kon, as well as spotlighting specific sectors of the industry such as the Nippon Connection film festival and the Arts Theatre Guild. A quiz and useful guides to further reading and online resources are also included. The work featured here culminates in a comprehensive and insightful guide that does justice to the diversity of cinema Japan, both past and present. Many will be pleasantly surprised to discover some lesser-known works such as the films of Sion Sono, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969), and *Fist of the North Star* (1986) lining up alongside the usual suspects of Kurosawa, Ozu, and Mizoguchi. Equal coverage is given to each film and

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genre, while the text largely avoids the generalisations and paper-thin surface analysis that mars so many national cinema guides. The individual contributions do well to heed the book's mandate to present a culturally-specific cinema; Marc Saint-Cyr's allegorical reading of *Lady Snowblood* (1973) and Tsutsui's introduction to *kaiju eiga*/monster movies are worthy of mention for the way they clearly situate the films within well-defined, albeit evolving socio-political and cultural contexts.

There are of course certain hazards in providing anything in the form of a comprehensive guidebook, namely the films that are not included. Inevitably there are some glaring omissions here: *The Human Condition* (1959-1961), Shohei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983) and Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) being just a few major works that fail to feature. There is also scant mention of 'Generation X' filmmaking in the 1990s, meaning that important figures like Shinji Aoyama and Naomi Kawase are only mentioned in passing. Furthermore, no coverage is given to pre-war and silent cinema, with the exception of Ozu's *I Was Born, But...* (1932) and Mizoguchi's *Osaka Elegy* (1936). This is a shame considering the growth of scholarship in this area, such as the work of Aaron Gerow, and the existence of interesting works *A Page of Madness* (1926) and *Dragnet Girl* (1933).

In terms of a Japanese-Western dichotomy, the book's invocation of Hollywood films as reference points becomes repetitive and is hardly helpful towards an understanding of Japanese genres as culturally-specific entities. However, the ever-presence of the West and specifically Hollywood throughout the text does at least provide the authors with ample opportunity to touch upon Japan's role as a global cinema affected by transcultural flows. Although seeking to understand Japanese cinema first and foremost as nation-specific, the book benefits greatly from the writers' consistent awareness of the tensions brought about by globalisation and its impact upon notions of Japanese locality. In this regard, Brian Ruh views Japanese animation as 'globalization in action' (59) as he traces the transnational dimensions of anime's origins and current production. Elsewhere, Jelena Stojkovic, taking into account recent US remakes of Japanese horror films, remarks sagely that the popularisation of J-Horror created the 'contra-effect of becoming not only the Japanese mainstream but also the Hollywood mainstream'. (36). Thus, while it pinpoints expressions of Japaneseness, this volume brings to life Japanese film as a profoundly global cinema subject to non-national as much as national concerns.

Aside from an overall stylistic unevenness between academic and journalistic analysis, the one major drawback overshadowing the work as a whole is the way it reinforces the standard images and interpretations of contemporary Japanese cinema it wishes to move beyond. While it is

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suggested by John Berra that the success and notoriety of horror and extreme cinema have obscured the legacy of other sectors and belies Japan's cinematic diversity (7), the choice of films throughout often negates any attempt to provide a truly alternative view. For example, Brian Ruh's introduction to anime points out the general misconception that Japanese animation is either 'light fare for little kids or contains ultraviolence and sadistic sex' (61). With only a few exceptions, the proceeding chapter on animation lends some weight to the misconception by presenting films that mostly fall into one of these two categories.

Much of the text seeks to sidestep persistent notions of a violent, excessive and eccentric cinema popular outside Japan, all the while selecting films that derive from genres predominantly featuring extreme violence, sadist rituals, and sexual depravity. Such images are hardly dispelled as the book falls somewhat short of some of its primary objectives. That being said, *Directory of World Cinema: Japan* remains a welcome addition to a large field of research, offering one of the most detailed and comprehensive reviews available. It provides novices with an accessible guide to over sixty years of film material and for those familiar with Japanese film a resource for further critical reflection. On this evidence future editions in the series will be worth savouring.