

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Samurai. Godzilla. The life of a traditional Japanese family unfolding in tatami-mat rooms. The brute violence of yakuza films and the pure *shōjo* girls of anime. For most film lovers in English-speaking areas this is the image of Japanese cinema.

This view isn't wrong. These are certainly essential elements of Japanese cinema. This book, however, was written for people who want to know the ways in which these elements are related to one another or who have an intellectual interest in the deeper world hidden in the background. It is the tale of how the Japanese people took an optical machine originally invented in the West—the cinematograph—and made it their own, absorbing it and utilizing it to create a distinctive culture. In other words, it is none other than the story of modernity in Japan.

When encountering a work of art, you must always be wary of a certain trap. That is the temptation to praise a work before really understanding it. I hope that readers will come to see that behind any film they have watched and enjoyed there is a huge

accumulation of culture and that no single work is complete in itself but always emerges as part of a chain of relationships to history.

“Japanese cinema” is made up of two words: “Japanese” and “cinema.” For those who are interested in Japanese cinema, the choice of which of those words to emphasize makes a big difference in the direction of their explorations.

Those who prioritize “cinema” will put all filmmakers—whether Kurosawa Akira, D. W. Griffiths, Jean-Luc Godard, Charlie Chaplin, or Steven Spielberg—on one horizontal plane. The history of Japanese cinema is but a portion of the history of world cinema. That Kurosawa is Japanese is merely incidental and what is significant is the extent to which his works contribute to the expansion of the global language of technical images. A person who loves cinema transcends ethnic or national boundaries. A film lover is a resident of something we might call the “World Republic of Cinema.” Cinema has its own specific language and by becoming conversant in it, one should be able to understand the cinematic works of any filmmaker in the world. For someone who believes in the international nature of film, more than being Japanese, it is fundamentally important that Japanese cinema is cinema. From this perspective, lovers of Japanese cinema also love the films of John Ford, Godard, and Im Kwon-Taek.

Conversely, another viewpoint insists that Japanese cinema must be seen as part of the culture of Japan. After all, the camera movements of Mizoguchi Kenji are strongly influenced by the methods of traditional Japanese painting. Kurosawa Akira borrows many of the themes for his works from Kabuki—the popular theater of Edo period Japan. Youth melodramas of the 1960s are sharply inscribed with the class divisions of postwar Japanese society, and to understand the anime of Miyazaki Hayao, one must know about the distinctive imaginative world of Japanese folklore. From this perspective, it is impossible to ignore cinema’s intimate connections with Japanese culture, from literature to painting and theater. Or rather, you need to know not just culture but also the realities of Japanese history and society. Only when one can understand both the images in the hearts of the people who

made Japanese films and those in the hearts of those who laughed or cried along when they watched those films is it possible to grasp the depth of Japanese cinema.

Which of these two perspectives is correct?

In fact, both are correct and both are necessary. Although Japanese cinema cannot be separated from the cultural particularities of Japan, we must also see it as a part of the universal history of humanity's desire for images and movement. The situation is the same in the United States. The depth of someone's grasp of American cinema can vary considerably based on whether he or she is knowledgeable about the ethnic diversity of American society, or the New and Old Testament, or Jewish comedic traditions, or the trauma exerted by the Vietnam War. Yet, at the same time, it is precisely because film fans around the world have discovered something universal that transcends history in Japanese and American cinema that they love and respect them.

As a film historian, I would be delighted if Japanese cinema becomes a launching pad for the readers of this book to develop a general interest in Japanese people and Japanese culture. At the same time, I believe it would be equally wonderful if an encounter with Japanese films stimulates readers' interest in seeing more films from around the world.

Ah yes, I would like to add one additional thing.

In terms of world history, just as the nineteenth century did not end in 1900, but rather in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War, the first decade of Japanese cinema of the 2000s did not end in 2010. That is because in 2011, Japan experienced a decisive rupture. The great disaster of East Japan—a massive earthquake and tsunami, followed by the meltdown of nuclear reactors at Fukushima—created an irreversible discontinuity in the hundred-plus year history of Japanese cinema.

What will Japanese cinema become in the wake of this disaster? As I am writing this preface, already six years have gone by. In that time, hundreds of documentary films have been produced. In addition, there is no shortage of fiction films making reference to these

terrible events, appealing to the melodramatic imaginations of their viewers. It is extremely difficult to get a picture of the overall shape of the cinematic works after this disaster. Film historians will have to take the utmost care, and will undoubtedly need time to develop any kind of comprehensive reflection on this work. That is the reason this book ends just before 2011.

I would like to express my thanks to Phil Kaffen for translating this book whose content ranges across so many topics, as well as to editor Mark Oshima for his careful and thorough chapter notes. I am grateful for the short comments offered by Professor Paul Anderer, an extraordinary scholar of Japanese literature, and those of the generous film scholar, Dudley Andrew. Finally, I would also like to dedicate this book to my first girlfriend, who rebuffed my invitation to go see *Citizen Kane* together when we were thirteen years old.

WHAT IS JAPANESE CINEMA?

