

4-21-2020

## Butts, Blood, and Bombs: The American Occupation's Effect on Japanese Cinema

Dan Geary

Grand Valley State University, [gearyd@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:gearyd@mail.gvsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Geary, Dan (2020) "Butts, Blood, and Bombs: The American Occupation's Effect on Japanese Cinema," *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol10/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cinesthesia by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Japanese cinema started its own new wave at roughly the same time as the French. Unlike the French New Wave, the Japanese New Wave started in the studio system rather than independent production companies, with young, little-known filmmakers. As David Dresser in his book *Eros plus Massacre* wrote, "Superficial comparisons between the Japanese New Wave cinema and the French New Wave, typically to imply greater integrity to the latter, have served the cultural cliché that the Japanese are merely great imitators, that they do nothing original... To see the Japanese New Wave as an imitation of the French New Wave (an impossibility since they arose simultaneously) fails to see the Japanese context out of which the movement arose" (4). The Japanese New Wave focused on upsetting the social conventions of Japanese society, creating a new film style that railed against traditional Japan. Japanese New Wave Cinema radically changed Japan's national cinema, as it rebelled against traditional and post-occupation Japanese cinema and culture, defied censorship, and created radical themes from experimental formal and narrative elements.



Japanese filmmaking started in 1896, when several of Edison's Kinetoscopes were imported into the country - only two years after the original Kinetoscope was introduced in New York (Dissanayake, 12). Cinema was a major turning point for Japanese culture because "The Japanese people who had shunned foreigners for several centuries began watching *Mary Queen of Scots* and *The Spirit of Saint Louis* with great eagerness and enthusiasm" (Dissanayake, 12). These silent films were accompanied by a lecturer, called a *benshi*, who would interpret and comment on the film, becoming a mediating link between the foreign film and the local audience. By using *benshi*, the foreign films became more local and homogenized to Japanese culture. As the film industry grew, the militaristic government began homogenizing the film industry to Japanese culture even more by allowing films that agreed with Japanese nationalism and censoring those that didn't (Dissanayake, 13).

On August 6, 1945, America dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and three days later, dropped another atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Before the nuclear attacks, the multiple firebombings of World War II left Japan in a state of unprecedented devastation. After surrendering to the U.S., American forces occupied Japan who feared the threat of Chinese communism spreading to the weakened Japan. When occupying Japan, General Douglas MacArthur and other American bureaucrats organized the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), whose main goal was to introduce democratic social, political, and economic ideals into the formerly imperialistic Japan ("*Occupation*"). The American occupation affected the film industry when the SCAP officials reviewed the Japanese film industry. The SCAP started to censor, ban, and burn wartime productions and "encouraged films on democratic themes, such as women's rights and the struggle against militarism, and even insisted that modernization should include kissing scenes (long forbidden by Japanese tradition)" (Thompson

and Bordwell, 360). However, because of the American occupation, Japan's economy rapidly recovered from the war, and the film industry started to expand.

During this period of the integration of American culture, SCAP began screening Hollywood films throughout Japan. These films became box office hits, yet despite their popularity, domestic films still had control over the market. The major production studios in Japan, Shochiku, Toho, Daiei, and later Toei, were producing, "almost 500 films a year in 1960" (Thompson and Bordwell, 360). However, the films being produced were influenced by Hollywood, using western style formal elements, adapting western works, and were under threat of censorship if the film's themes didn't align with western ideology. Since the domestic films were competing with Hollywood, and because of the industry's control over the local market, Crofts argues that Japan's national cinema is similar to European commercial cinema, as it "targets a market sector somewhat distinct from European-model art cinema, and thus vies more directly with Hollywood for box office. Typical genres of a European commercial cinema include the thriller, comedy and, especially in the 1960s, soft-core" (49). Crofts later states, "While Japan is Hollywood's largest overseas market, in 1988 domestic product retained 49.7 per cent of box office, specializing largely in soft-core and adolescent melodramas" (50).

Though Japanese cinema was influenced by Hollywood, the films still expressed national identity through themes of national pride, showcasing Japan's unique culture and history, and by using the western style



formal elements in a new way. The best example of a western influenced director of the post-occupation cinema is Akira Kurosawa.

The first Japanese film that garnered international success was Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), a film that was only a moderate success locally, but after winning a Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, Kurosawa started a new age for Japanese cinema that is known as the Japanese Golden Age. In the film *Rashomon*, Kurosawa adapts 1940's Hollywood flashback techniques, with a unique twist of using different styles to present each variation on the set of events. Kurosawa also adapted Hollywood style compositions, as he became a master of using balance, leading lines, the golden ratio, color, lines, shapes, and movement, to craft images. Kurosawa's style of composition was similar to American director Orson Welles, perhaps a product of his exposure to American films. "Kurosawa adapted a Wellesian shot design, with strong deep focus" (Thompson and Bordwell, 389). The themes in *Rashomon* are also rooted in western ideology, with mankind's inner struggle against egotism. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, author of the book, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, writes, "What leads humans to destroy themselves is egotism. At the same time, what saves humans comes from themselves, too. Egotism must be countered by human compassion, honesty, and altruism" (183). Kurosawa's vision of humanism is close to western values, as it focuses on how the individual can better themselves.

Daikajueiga, or the monster genre, is influenced by western culture that also defined Japanese post-war national cinema. Stemming from the gendai-geki films (films set in the contemporary period), these films were made as a reaction to the horror of the second world war. Not only did the mass casualties and destruction scar Japan, but the forced integration of a culture that was unlike their own caused dissonance. The search for a national identity is

common throughout these films, represented in the struggle between the ‘alien’/’artificial’ attacking or destroying the ‘familiar’/’natural’ (Napier, 330). The film *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954), adapted Hollywood style narrative and formal elements, imitating Hollywood monster films of the time. However, the themes of *Godzilla* are unique to the struggles of the post-war Japanese people. The themes of anti-war and anti-American occupation are present in the creation of the monster, as *Godzilla* is created by a nuclear explosion, which is American science, and the world is saved by using Japanese science,



“personified by the humane Japanese scientist whose suicide helps destroy *Godzilla*” (Napier, 331). *Godzilla* also had themes of the conflict between modern and pre-modern, as *Godzilla*, the monster made with modern science, destroys a pagoda, the tiered towers of worship that represent tradition and the sacred.

The Japanese New Wave started in the late 1950’s in the context of a studio system remade under the American occupation. Unlike French New Wave filmmakers, “Japan had a strong, vertically integrated studio system,” that made it hard to work outside of it (Thompson and Bordwell, 433). Unlike their French counterparts, the New Wave films had higher budgets because of the studios’ support, but focused on the younger, more rebellious audience. However, once the box office started to decline with the advent of television, the studios began to lower ticket prices. The young New Wave filmmakers decided to quit the studios and become independent. A chain of specialized theaters, the Art Theater Guild (ATG), began showing double features, and later financing and distributing films, allowing the New Wave

directors to create independent production companies (Thompson and Bordwell, 433). The beginning of the Japanese New Wave is commonly credited to Nagisa Oshima, who, like Jean-Luc Godard, worked as a film critic before his directorial debut. The New Wave doesn't have a set of concrete themes or styles, however, they do tend to have social criticism, experimental formal elements, and auteurist approaches in common. The theme of traditional versus modern discussed earlier is common in New Wave films, as the films, "savagely criticized Japanese society, revealing oppression and conflict behind the image of a tranquil, prosperous nation. Theft, murder, and rape were rendered casually. The directors flaunted the vulgarity of their heroes and heroines, and often critique was framed in political terms" (Thompson and Bordwell, 433). The New Wave directors also targeted post-occupation Japanese cinema, targeting the mix of western ideology (humanism) and the 'exoticism' of traditional Japan (as an attempt to appeal to international audiences) that did not represent Japan's national identity.

Nagisa Oshima desired to help created a 'new' Japan, after witnessing the interpolation of the Japanese people by western culture which was creating a corrupt and failing Japan. As a film critic, Oshima thought that the bourgeois post-occupation filmmakers didn't portray a 'self' in their movies, instead

they focused on making their films more like American ones (Russel. 106). Oshima used a social realist style to show the audience the 'real' Japanese society, and not the 'exotic' society that post-occupation



cinema used to attract international attention as it refused to address the ongoing political unrest. Oshima's, "ideological task [for his films] was to define a radical Japanese subject position that would be neither the universal humanism of the 1950s nor the imperialist/conformist passivity of traditionalist ideology" (Russel, 106). In Oshima's film *Death by Hanging* (1968), the use of documentary style cinematography created a disturbing effect as the xenophobia against the Korean main character R, the crimes that R commits, and the corruption of the Japanese officials seem all too realistic. Oshima was showing a Japanese society that had completely lost its identity and national pride after the American occupation, a society in need of change.

Censorship in Japan, even after the American occupation, was influenced by the western ideology that was introduced under SCAP. As film reviewer Colette Balmain states, "The films of the Japanese New Wave would challenge traditional interpretations of obscenity" (21). Oshima, rebelling against forced western ideals, was one of the first and most radical of the New Wave filmmakers to fight against censorship. In his film, *Empire of the Senses* (Oshima, 1976), multiple close-up shots of male and female genitalia are seen, which was highly obscene even when compared to soft-core films in which the genitalia were covered. Oshima was arrested and charged with obscenity, however, "In 1982, the charges against Oshima were dismissed and the ruling allowed the more explicit representation of sex and sexuality in Japanese cinema" (Balmain, 22). Oshima's fight against censorship was a victory for the rest of the New Wave filmmakers, as the New Wave films contained images of murder and rape, to emphasize the corruptness of modern Japan that would have been censored before Oshima's court case.

Shohei Imamura, another key figure in the New Wave movement, used vulgar imagery as his subject matter focused on the ‘low-life’ of Japan, such as prostitutes, pimps, and black-marketers trying to live in the corrupt modern age. Imamura’s characters were the opposite of the characters in Kurosawa’s golden age films; they flourished in their chaotic lower-class worlds. Imamura used fast pace editing to create an energy that contradicted the long takes that were abundant in traditional Japanese films. Imamura, like Oshima, used a documentary style to blur the lines between reality and fiction, however, his works were, “less stylized than Oshima’s work of the period” (Thompson and Bordwell,434). Imamura also critiqued the negative impact of the western influence on Japan in his film, *Pigs and Battleships* (Imamura 1961), where the Japanese people are compared to the pigs that eat the scraps thrown off the



American battleship that was docked in the town of Yokosuka. Another way that Imamura uses the radical themes of his films to critique post-occupation cinema is in the roles that the female and male characters play. In his films, the men are portrayed

without honor, motivated by immoral goals and desires. In most post-occupation films, the male heroes’ goals are to obtain honor and individualism, all while portraying a traditional sense of national pride. In Imamura’s films, the women, although ‘low-life’ prostitutes, find independence and power - although they are objectified and sexualized.

Seijun Suzuki was popular in Japan for his stylized versions of B-movies. Unlike other New Wave directors who left the studio system to create their own production companies, Suzuki worked through the studio Nikkatsu for most of his career (Raynes). Suzuki’s style is

the antithesis of Hollywood films, as he abandons traditional formal and narrative elements.

Suzuki's films are made from generic scripts that are handed down to him, which are then used to create a free-form jazz style, experimenting with narrative with complex flashback structures (that usually don't advance the plot), color design, and intricate editing and camerawork, such as handheld cameras and out of place jump-cuts (Bingham).

Suzuki created an artistic effects from visual and formal elements that originated in generic scripts as a critique of genre films of the post-occupation golden era. Suzuki's films, much like other Japanese New Wave (and French New Wave) films, usually contain a humorous undertone, as if the movies don't take themselves seriously. Suzuki also critiques the western influence in Japan, for example in his movie, *Tokyo Drifter* (Suzuki, 1966), the main characters go to the Western Saloon in which the American people in the bar are portrayed as dimwitted hooligans who are beaten in a barfight by the Japanese main characters. The clash between traditional and modern Japanese culture in *Tokyo Drifter* is portrayed through taking the western-orientated script and adding traditional Japanese ideals, such as main character Tetsu's hatred towards those who don't have a sense of duty.

From a country that used benshi to homogenize the national film culture to a country that was forced to integrate the ideals from a foreign country, Japan's national cinema reflects the problems that artists faced in their society. Post-occupation cinema, with a revitalized economy, conformed to western influence. The war and its aftermath left a scar in the Japanese psyche that couldn't completely heal, as the *daikaijueiga* portrayed the horror of war and the loss of a national identity that was a defining symbol of pride for the Japanese people. Japanese cinema has a firm grip on the domestic market and has had some success in the international market. The golden age films of Kurosawa catered to the western ideology and fused it with the

unique culture of traditional Japan. The New Wave films of Oshima addressed the international audience to spread a wider message about failing Japanese traditions. The Japanese New Wave changed Japanese national cinema, as experimentation with narrative and formal elements changed commercial and art house cinema outside the borders of Japan. Challenging censorship, creating independent studios that competed with the studio system, and critiquing the social issues that had gone ignored were the hallmarks of the new cinema's artistic freedom.

Works Cited

- Balmain, Colette. *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*. Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Bingham, Adam. *Time and Place Are Nonsense: The Films of Seijun Suzuki*. Cineaste, Fall 2016
- Cardullo, Robert. *Vengeance Was His: The Post-War Cinema of Japan's Shohei Imamura*. Asian Cinema, 2013.
- Crofts, Stephen. *Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s*. Rutgers University, 2002.
- Dissanayake, Wimal. *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print.
- Maher, Michael. "Japan's Influence on Cinema After WWII." *The Beat*, 13 Sept. 2015, [www.premiumbeat.com/blog/japans-influence-on-cinema-after-wwii/](http://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/japans-influence-on-cinema-after-wwii/).
- McLelland, Mark. "Sex and Censorship During the Occupation of Japan." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 9 Sept. 2012, [apjff.org/2012/10/37/Mark-McLelland/3827/article.html](http://apjff.org/2012/10/37/Mark-McLelland/3827/article.html).
- Napier, Susan J. "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from Godzilla to Akira." *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. (1996): 235-262. Print.
- "Occupation and Reconstruction of Japan, 1945–52." U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, [history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/japan-reconstruction](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/japan-reconstruction).
- Rayns, Tony. *Branded to Thrill: The Delirious Cinema of Suzuki Seijun*. Institute of Contemporary Arts. 1994.
- Russel, Catherine. *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure, and New Wave Cinemas*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. McGraw, 2003.

Vick, Tom. Time and Place Are Nonsense: The Films of Seijun Suzuki. Smithsonian Institution, 2015.

Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema. Duke University Press, 2005

Filmography

Honda, Ishirō, director. *Godzilla*. Toho, 1954.

Imamura Shōhei, director. *Pigs and Battleships*. Nikkatsu, 1961.

Kurosawa, Akira, director. *Rashomon*. Daiei Film, 1950.

Oshima, Nagisa, director. *Death by Hanging*. Sozsha Art Theatre Guild, 1968.

Ōshima Nagisa, director. *Empire of the Senses*. Anatole Dauman, 1976.

Suzuki, Seijun, director. *Tokyo Drifter*. Toho, 1966.