

Cinema of Actuality : Japanese avant-garde filmmaking
in the season of image politics

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The Japanese word *eizo* is central to an understanding of the significance of the interventions made into the cultural life of the nation by a relatively small grouping of artists and writers working between the 1950s and 1970s. Traditionally used as a phenomenological term in science and philosophy the character employed connoted shadow or silhouette, later shifting to signify optical processes. Like the Greek term *tehkne*, creativeness and the tools used to achieve the outcome is relative, nuanced and complex.

The vitality of Japanese cinema has been ever present within cinephiles experience; actually attending a screening though is usually restricted to festivals. The historical bibliography is extensive, with a tendency to celebrate the *frissons* of sex and violence, an aspect dealt with in this volume but with a good deal more relevance and care. Studies which grapple with the complexities of cross-cultural analysis are few – Noel Burch's work from 30 years ago most notably and referred to here – and the author is well qualified to achieve an excellent addition to the literature, aided I suspect by the distance of time.

The theoretical scaffolding of the period developed and initiated predominantly by Matsumoto Toshio, enable a realisation of the aesthetic and historical issues and the progression of the protagonists, including most notably Oshima Nagisa, towards the development of a body of work distinct from the *samurai* and *yakuza* melodramas more familiar in the West at the time. The chronological development is illusive as the emphasis is on issues – image theory (*eizo ron*, images specifically made using machines); debates which moved away from *riariti* (reality) towards *akuchuaritii* (actuality); and the incorporation of journalistic devices and performance events. The term *avant-garde* was applied to the cinema form emerging, related closely to documentary film, rather than to arthouse or artists' moving image. Perhaps this distinction could have been drawn more clearly in the book's title by the use of the term *nouvelle vague*, thus aligning with the French New Wave of the time, with whom many values were shared.

The post-war generations of Japan were well-educated and unlike the earlier regimented generations, restless for change. From the late 1950s onwards cooperative approaches to creative experiment of all kinds bloomed, unimpeded by the (western) cult of the individual artist working alone. Likewise in the streets, students agitated and developed alliances with farmers and communities being forced into accepting the inexorable creep of a government 'modernisation program' of the nation's resources, rallied and defended by corporate media organisations. (I remember local television news channels in the 60s lapping up the extraordinary images of pitched battles of Japanese students, peasants and police, later repeated briefly, by European and American comrades).

In this context of social fluidity, an established genre of *pink film* (erotica), which like international sexploitation movies made quickly and cheaply, became the hothouse to which imaginative young men were drawn, (including the infamous right-wing nationalist Mishima Yukio). Wakamatsu Koji's earlier work *remediated* the print and television journalism of the day, directing '...our attention to the material gap between the cinematic image and the appropriated journalistic image..' within the spectacle of flesh and violence. The group of filmmakers often published discussions of each others work, linking through to the debates of leftist forces violently agitating against the grip of capitalist authority.

Another grouping of filmmakers took a different approach in response to events made sensational by the media.

Documenting the life and death of a young serial killer, they visited the places throughout Japan from birth where he had lived, worked and committed murder, recording in a series of long takes, the appearance of the landscape and the people found there, with a spoken narrative sparsely recounting the formative moments of the boy's existence.* A discourse developed known as *fukeiron* (landscape theory) examining whether what in the West would be called a poetic form could engage forcefully with politics. The author pursues this discussion engagingly and at length, with reference to many other thinkers (including European, though not other *avant-garde* and artist filmmakers pursuing this line of research).

A parallel off-shoot from *fukeiron* occurs with Wakamatsu and Adachi Masao arriving in Palestine on their way back from presenting at the Cannes Film Festival. Offering solidarity to the Palestinian cause through the production of a film, *The Red Army/PFLP*, a row with their hosts developed over the images of

everyday life in the landscape of the refugee camp and the women who ran it. The contradictions of the filmmakers having involvement with the world solidarity movement, and those of other filmmakers including Godard and Miéville of the French New Wave are examined in some detail, leading to the final chapter marking the demise of the radical movements in Japan, both those of the students and the filmmakers who form the core subjects of the study.

Reabsorption into the mainstream of the film, television and official contemporary art industries leave a few of the original protagonists to re-emerge with *kojin eiga* (private film). Iimura Takahiko (reviewed in LDR <http://www.leonardo.info/ldr.php>) and others including Matsumoto, establish a strand of video art which in the final chapter is replaced in the present era by the actuality of internet social media and still developing modes of activism.

* Fortunately, at the time of writing this review, *A.K.A. Serial Killer* was available in full with sub-titles on the internet, unlike most of the other films discussed by the author, a frustrating state of affairs for the full appreciation of both the book and the films.

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