

Japan Foundation Supported Project

Wild Japan: Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film at the National Film Theatre

Date: 3 – 30 November 2006

Venue: National Film Theatre, London

The season of Japanese films shown at the NFT in London, entitled 'Wild Japan: Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film' was an extraordinary exploration of genre film-making in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. This period saw many young directors venting their disapproval and frustration with the then conservative nature of many Japanese cultural and social mores.

This film season was a fiesta for the eyes, a magic-lantern for the mind and a provocative challenge to the sensibilities. This season, moreover, was a unique opportunity to seize those rare jewels of radical Japanese cinema.

Certainly the mood and tone of the season highlight the connecting points of Japanese and Western film-culture, with audiences for this festival usually made up of Western men, middle-aged and intellectual, and some independent-minded and culturally sophisticated Japanese females, teachers, academics, and students.

The films in the season remain highly pertinent to today's post-modern world of malaise and materialism, in that the films are a reminder of the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema (the 1960s) and the hopes and achievements of the new generation of 1964 (e.g. The Tokyo Olympics and Shinkansen) - and how these ideals no longer remain in Japan or the West. The unrestrained energy and spontaneous passion of these films are only equaled by their iconic beauty.

The highlights of the season were the following films:

Ito Shunya's *Female Convict Scorpion* (1972) is an exploitation classic, an art house wonder and feminist movie all flowing into one - incandescent and daring too.

Pale Flower (1964) is a beautifully shot, black-and-white existential Yakuza film and is a classic lost treasure of the Japanese New Wave, by Shinoda Masahiro, who later made the exquisite neo-classical masterpiece based on traditional Japanese Theatre, *Double Suicide*, shot also in black-and-white in 1969. But, whereas *Double Suicide* is a hymn to the Edo Era, *Pale Flower* is a dark homage to the quasi-Baudelairian French New Wave and to the films of Oshima Nagisa and Suzuki Seijun.

Stray Cat Rock: Sex Hunter (1977) by Hasebe Yasuharu is about girl-gang pandemonium and racial tensions - a mod juvenile classic.

School of the Holy Beast (1974) is a masterpiece directed by Suzuki Norifumi - A nunsplotation epic, justly recognised as one of the most radical and dynamic films in Japanese cinematic history.

However good such films are - and they are, indeed, very good - none match Suzuki Seijun's 1967 masterpiece *Branded To Kill*. This is a surreal, magical and disturbing tour-de-force, part existential thriller in the manner of Godard (only much more stylish and very Japanese) and part Yakuza movie which transcends all the genre-borders. The film is also both a romantic tragedy and a sombre, daring, social and symbolic commentary on 1960s life in the New Japan. The film, too, is a breathtaking blend of violence, eroticism and dark humour. It is a film, above all, about identity, destiny and human sorrow.

Branded To Kill is the crowning achievement of 1960s Japanese New Wave cinema and this film, along with many others in this season, remind us of how dynamic the 1960s were, both artistically and ideologically, in Japan and in the West.

Such comparisons of the Japanese and European New Wave in Cinema in the 1960s can lead to closer cross-cultural experiences in Anglo-Japanese relations. This season of films also leads us back to the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema (the 1960s) and how, in both Japan and the West, artistic merit and individual artistic expression were held to be almost sacred, and certainly life-affirming.

Stephen Wilson