

Japan Foundation Supported Project

The Cruel Beauty Of Masumura Yasuzo

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Venue: Opening at the National Film Theatre, London on 10th September followed by UK Regional Tour

Launched at the National Film Theatre in London last September, 'The Cruel Beauty of Masumura Yasuzo' was a season of eight films by the innovative and radical Japanese film director Masumura Yasuzo. His best films come from the late 1950s and 1960s and are a revelation, showing that his work really should be better known outside of Japan.

The first film shown was his directorial debut, the neo-realist romance 'Kisses' (1957), the film that set him out as one of the key architects of the Japanese New Wave. Indeed Oshima Nagisa commented at the time "a powerful, irresistible force has arrived in Japanese cinema". Nozoe Hitomi and Kawaguchi Hiroshi excel as the lovers who meet while visiting their respective fathers in prison. However their idyll is soon shattered and the film ends on a sombre note.

The second film in the season was 'Giants and Toys' (1958), and this was a radical departure from 'Kisses'. Masumura turns to Cinemascope with its garish, vibrant colour and this time pitches Nozoe Hitomi and Kawaguchi Hiroshi into the world of big business. 'Giants and Toys' is a provocative and extraordinary social satire on Japan's emerging consumer society. Nozoe Hitomi proved to be a sensation as the taxi switchboard operator who begins to believe in her own publicity after she has been chosen to be the company's poster girl. She is transformed from youthful rebellion to being a victim of a nightmarish corporate monolith.

The next three films in the season show Masumura Yasuzo confirming his status as an outsider within the studio system, by employing divergent styles and themes (indeed a parallel could be drawn here with Ichikawa Kon, another eclectic and superb director little known outside of Japan). 'The Precipice' (1958) is an intense melodrama set in the Alps and is reminiscent of the films of Douglas Sirk. In the film a climber is killed on an expedition designed to help him forget his passion for his married lover.

'A False Student' (1960) is a noirish existential thriller soaked in university politics. The film is less successful than either 'Kisses' or 'Giants and Toys'. The next film, 'A Wife Confesses', stars Wakao Ayako, who is forced to choose between her brutal husband and her secret lover when they are trapped together on a perilous climb in the mountains again.

Following these came one of Masumura Yasuzo's finest films, perhaps his most fully realised - 'Red Angel' (1966). A devastatingly intense film set in a front-line hospital during the Sino-Japanese conflict, the film focuses on the relationship between a young nurse (Wakao Ayako) and a disillusioned, morphine-addicted doctor. The film is shot in stark and intense black-and-white and is somewhat astonishing and harrowing in its graphic portrayal of war and in the directness of its critique of the military. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the film is the linking of sexuality and violence (and in this is somewhat reminiscent of the films of Oshima). Wakao Ayako is remarkable in the role of the nurse and gives an extraordinary performance.

The penultimate film in the season, "The Wife of Seishu Hanoaka (1967), was the least successful in the set of eight, but has echoes of Kurosawa's 1965 classic 'Red Beard', but without the humanity of that film. However Wakao Ayako is still outstanding as the wife who is willing to be a human guinea pig for the sake of her marriage.

None of these, however, compared to the final - and greatest film - of the season, namely 'Blind Beast' (1969), a sadomasochistic love-story in which a blind sculptor captures a model, imprisons her in a surreal warehouse. The model, after struggling against her captor, ultimately submits to his 'art of touch'. Their final search for gratification is both shocking and sad in the extreme. The film is truly a masterpiece.

Masumura Yasuzo once wrote that Japanese society was "essentially regimented, freedom and the individual do not exist" and, after visiting Europe, he wanted to portray in his films "the type of beautifully vital, strong people I came to know there". Neither of these two statements would really hold sway today, but Masumura Yasuzo's work - and he as a radical Japanese filmmaker - is a key to unlock our understanding of Japan and Japanese Society in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, with jaded yet dynamic precision and an endearing zest for Life.

Stephen Wilson