AT THE MOVIES

by James Bailey

The average American knows two kinds of Japanese movies, if he knows any at all. In the first, grunting samurai slash at each other with swords. In the second, a prehistoric monster stomps through downtown Tokyo like King Kong, derailing trains, swatting down aircraft, and smashing buildings.

Today, such scenes seldom appear on the Japanese screen. Like the Western in the United States, samurai and monster films moved to TV (see box, pp. 72–73). Indeed, in Japan as in the United States, the advent of TV took its toll of the cinema business. Attendance is down to one-sixth of its 1960 level. (In the United States, the drop has been less dramatic, but ticket sales still lag below what they were 25 years ago.) In terms of production, Japan's film industry now devotes anywhere from one-half to two-thirds of its annual output to pornography.

Porn, however, accounts for only 16 percent of box-office revenues. Strict censorship ensures that the raciest parts of these movies are their titles: *Hateshinaki Zechō* (*Endless Ecstasy*), *Uzuku* (*Sex Itch*), and *Jokōsei Repōto—Yūko No Shiroi Mune* (*High School Co-ed Report—Yuko's White Breasts*).

What Japanese enjoy most at the movies is not porn but harmless family fare. In 1983, *Nankyoku Monogatari* (*Antarctica*), a tale of sleigh dogs accidentally abandoned on the frozen continent, attracted more viewers than any other domestic film in Japanese history. Ranked behind *Nankyoku Monogatari* on the 1983 list of box-office winners are romantic love stories—one involving a college girl and a private detective, another entangling a high school beauty with a visitor from outer space.

Foreign offerings have become increasingly visible. Today's youth, who make up almost three-quarters of the Japanese movie-going audience, eat Western-style food, wear Western clothes, listen to Western music, and watch Western movies. Twenty-four of the 30 most successful features in Japan were made in the West, mostly in America. Among the more popular in recent years have been *Journey of Love and Youth* and *Dusk*—more familiar to Americans as, respectively, *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *On Golden Pond*.

Twenty-five years ago, the Japanese were relatively content with their own cinema. A 1959 survey showed that 85 to 90 per-

cent of Japanese between the ages of 15 and 19 "disliked foreign films and never went." Internationally renowned directors such as Kurosawa Akira (whose *Rashōmon* took first prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival), Ozu Yasujirō, and Naruse Mikio enjoyed the support of a studio system that produced almost 500 films in 1960. Their technical and dramatic skills moved Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie, the authors of *The Japanese Film* (1959), to label the Japanese film industry as "one of the world's most vitally creative."

Today, a film by a master such as Kurosawa still has enormous appeal: Only two other domestic releases have grossed more than his *Kagemusha* (*Shadow Warrior*), a lavish samurai epic that shared first prize at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival. But Japan's four largest studios—Tōhō, Tōei, Nikkatsu, and Shōchiku—have responded to competition from TV by moving away from film production. Kurosawa had to secure financing from Twentieth Century-Fox to make *Kagemusha*. Tōhō, his former employer, now earns much of its income by distributing foreign works and has branched out into real estate. The majors made only 116 films in 1983. Designed as commercial rather than critical vehicles, they almost always adhered to tried-and-true genres.

Such fidelity has its aesthetic drawbacks. Yet, repetition can also be an asset. As Thomas Cripps, a historian and former Wilson Center Fellow, observes, the use of "repeated and rewoven formulas and archetypes . . . invites us to see reflections of [a society's] values and attitudes." The Japanese silver screen may have lost some of its luster, but it still serves as a somewhat faithful mirror, revealing the Japanese as they see themselves.

According to an old industry adage, a Japanese film-maker can never go wrong with *Chūshingura* (*The Loyal League*) or war. Since the turn-of-the-century advent of Japan's commercial cinema, *Chūshingura*, the saga of 47 samurai who commit mass suicide after avenging their master's death, has gone through more than 200 screen adaptations. The current dearth of locally made swordplay sagas suggests that times and tastes have changed, but there is still box-office appeal in war movies.

In August of 1981, Tōhō presented *Rengō Kantai* (*The Assembled Fleet*), a chronicle of the Japanese Imperial Navy up to the (disastrous) Battle of Midway. It remains one of the 10 most lucrative domestic films ever made. The following June, the studio restaged the Battle of Okinawa in *Himeyuri No Tō* (*Tower of the*

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Japanese movie viewers, whose forebears enjoyed daylong kabuki performances, sat enthralled through all 200 minutes of The Seven Samurai *(1954), still considered one of the best samurai films.*

Lillies) and last summer carried on—this time in the air—with *Zero-san Mōyū* (*Zero Fighter*). Nor has Tōhō alone profited from the dramatic possibilities of mayhem writ large. Tōei had one of its biggest 1982 hits with the World War II–era *Dai-Nippon Teikoku* (*The Imperial Japanese Empire*). In 1984, Shōchiku showed the 1937 conquest of Shanghai in *Shanghai Bansukingu* (*Welcome to Shanghai*). Needless to say, the upcoming 40th anniversary of what Americans call V-J Day will not go unobserved.

While World War II films have shocked Japan's neighbors—Chinese officials protested the whitewashing of Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki in Tōei's *Dai-Nippon Teikoku*—their popularity probably does not signal a renascent lust for martial glory. Few Japanese favor either greater defense spending (regularly about one percent of the Japanese gross national product, versus six percent in the United States) or an expansion of the all-volunteer Self-Defense Forces (manpower has stayed near 300,000 during the past two decades). Today's films of World War II tend to portray ordinary Japanese soldiers and civilians of the period as innocents, more sinned against than sinning.

Buffeted by fires, typhoons, and earthquakes, Japanese have nurtured a mentality known as *higaisha ishiki*, or "victim's con-

sciousness." Furthermore, past centuries of isolation have led many Japanese to feel easily misunderstood by the outside world. They consider their country's nature to be "inexpressible and, in the end, incomprehensible to foreigners," as the novelist Inoue Hisashi put it.

Seen through Japanese eyes, World War II becomes yet another link in a long chain of victimizations and misunderstandings. In *Dai-Nippon Teikoku*, the bombing of Pearl Harbor is but a Japanese reaction to Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt—as the President is depicted saying—to "get the Japanese to attack us"; a Japanese soldier advancing into Singapore is taken aback by the stiff resistance of the Chinese, who obviously do not realize that "we're trying to liberate them from British rule"; and at war's end, a judge at a war crimes tribunal in the Philippines tells Japanese defendants that "all Japanese deserve to die."

A few antiwar films criticize the military, but mostly for causing the deaths of so many young Japanese. Shōchiku studio's *Shanghai Bansukingu*, which roundly condemns Japanese atrocities in China, is the exception rather than the rule. Japanese noncombatants generally resemble the peace-loving villagers in *Kodomo No Goro Sensō Ga Atta* (*There Was a War When I Was a Child*)—prevented only through the strenuous efforts of the secret police from taking a half-American little girl to their bosoms and from giving rice cakes to starving Allied prisoners.

Troubles Ahead

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did little to dispel the Japanese perception of themselves as victims. In *Konoko O Nokoshite* (*Children of Nagasaki*), a boy survives the bombing of Nagasaki and later becomes a war correspondent. Tragedies elsewhere seem pale compared to his own experiences. At one point, he declares that the absence of nuclear weapons from more recent battlefields, including those in Vietnam and Biafra, causes him to "breathe a sigh of relief."

As seen in the movies, the Japanese sense of victimization continues during peacetime. Against a backdrop of exotic settings, *kaigai rokei* (foreign location) films depict the modern Japanese as a naive people at the mercy of the outside world.

A few examples convey the flavor of the genre. In *Kamisama, Naze Ai Ni Mo Kokkyō Ga Aru No?* (*God, Why Is There a Border in Love?*), a Japanese photographer in love with a girl he meets in Switzerland is deported from that country on trumped-up charges. *Kaigenrei No Yoru* (*Night of Martial Law*), filmed in Colombia, features a Japanese journalist and his girl-

friend who become embroiled in a coup d'état in the country of Nueva Granada. Eventually, both die by firing squad. The photojournalist hero of *Yōroppa Tokkyū* (*Trans-Europe Express*) endures insults to the Japanese as "yellow monkeys," survives a roughing-up by a muscle-bound bouncer, and is even refused by a Parisian prostitute who tells him, "No Asians."

The results of a 1980 survey by the Office of the Prime Minister illustrate the extent of Japanese xenophobia. Of the 3,000 men and women polled, 64 percent said that they did not wish to associate with non-Japanese, and 38 percent unconditionally opposed international marriage.

Hole in the Pants

In the face of increased outside contacts, however, the Japanese fear of foreigners should eventually fade. Between 1955 and 1978, external investment in the country jumped from $52.2 million to $20.2 billion; Japanese investment abroad, from $159.4 million to $4.6 billion. The resident foreign population also rose from 599,000 to 767,000, and the number of Japanese living overseas in October 1984 was up nearly two percent from a year earlier, to almost half a million.

Reflecting the increase in foreign exposure, many recent foreign location releases have lost their paranoid flavor. *Rongu Ran* (*Long Run*), which premièred in 1982, is about an athlete who roller-skates across the United States, accompanied by his trainer and a camerawoman. In the course of his journey, he receives a $1,000 reward for heroism and constant gifts of food and shelter. The 1984 hero of *Uindii* (*Races*), a professional motorcycle racer, never sets foot in Japan, maintaining an apartment in Berlin and a cabin in Canada. He prospers without Japanese female companionship (all his girlfriends are Caucasian), without Japanese food, even without expressing his deepest feelings in his native tongue, since his English is perfectly fluent.

If the Japanese cinema, as critic Furukawa Kiyomi asserts, is more likely to reflect the status quo than to challenge it, then the increase in more balanced portraits of foreign countries deserves much applause.

Cinema-going in Japan is a seasonal activity. Theaters do their best business during school holidays at New Year's, in late April and early May, and, of course, in summer, when distributors release those films aimed at Japanese under 20.

Their overwhelming favorite is the *aidoru eiga* (idol movie), a financial mainstay of the film industry. In 1981, Tōei studio reaped 55 percent of its revenues from idol movies, which ac-

THE JAPANESE AND TV: 'BLIND DEVOTION'

In few countries does television exert as much influence as it does in Japan. As Tokyo critic Satō Kuwashi puts it, "Most Japanese worship TV with blind devotion."

A recent survey by the public network, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, or NHK), supports Satō's assertion: The average family in Tokyo has its set on for eight hours and 12 minutes a day, the highest level of viewership in the world. By contrast, Americans, also noted for their addiction to TV, watch the tube for six hours and 44 minutes daily. So enamored are the Japanese of the medium that, when polled recently on which one of five items—newspapers, TVs, telephones, automobiles, and refrigerators—they would keep if they could have only *one*, 31 percent (versus three percent in the United States) answered "television."

NHK spokesman Yoshinari Mayumi asserts that television "fulfills a collective Japanese urge—to be all of a group together, watching TV." Indeed, Japan's "group" mentality has encouraged the medium's rapid growth. In 1959, six years after broadcasting began, networks advertised the marriage of Crown Prince Akihito with the slogan "Let's all watch the Prince's marriage on TV." Japanese bought four million sets that year. Similar sprees preceded the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 International Exposition in Ōsaka.

During the 1970s, color TVs, cars, and "coolers" (air conditioners) made up the "three Cs"—a trinity of appliances, possession of which signified membership in the middle class. Today, 98 percent of all Japanese households have color sets, versus 89 percent in the United States.

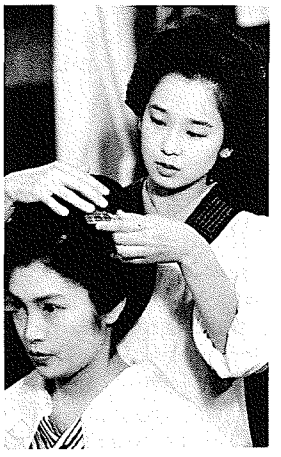
Most Japanese TV sets stay tuned to one of the two channels operated by NHK, a nonprofit network created by the government 32 years ago. NHK subsists on a fee of about $40 a year, paid on a voluntary basis by more than 30 million subscriber households. "Part national conscience, part full-time instructor," notes Frank Gibney in *Japan, the Fragile Superpower* (1975), NHK acts "as executor of what the French used to call a *mission civilisatrice* on every level of Japanese society."

On NHK's Channel One in Tokyo, viewers get a steady diet of news (38 percent of broadcast time), soap operas, sports, variety shows (23 percent), and "cultural" programs (16 percent) such as concerts, local folk festivals, and a recent 30-hour documentary on ancient Chinese caravan routes. Channel Three serves educational fare: high school science courses, music instruction, English, Russian, and Chinese lessons, and the finer points of *Go*, a Japanese game akin to checkers.

Even the NHK programs that fall in the "entertainment" category take pains to promote national values. One of the more successful Japanese soap operas was NHK's "Oshin," the

rags-to-riches story of a waif who becomes a supermarket magnate. From 1983 to 1984, the series ran for a total of 297 episodes. Oshin's powers of endurance—tested by a separation from her parents in childhood, her husband's suicide, and other assorted tragedies—became legendary. Parents admonished their children to "be like Oshin," and in 1983, when former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei was convicted of accepting bribes, he signaled his resolve to remain in politics by saying "I am a male Oshin."

Japan's five commercial networks—TV Tokyo, Fuji Telecasting, the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), TV Asahi, and the Nippon Television Network (NTV)—are far less didactic. Their most popular offerings are homegrown variety specials hosted by comedians and musicians. Hagimoto Kin'ichi, Japan's *Owarai Tarento No. 1* (Laugh Talent No. 1), presides over five different shows a week. U.S. imports fill 15 to 20 percent of airtime, but programs such as "Dallas" and "Kojak" seem relatively tame. (Viewers were puzzled, for example, by a "Dallas" episode that included an attempted rape but no nudity—both often shown on Japanese TV.) Japanese prefer their own samurai dramas, soap operas, and detective stories, all liberally laced with sex and violence. They also enjoy a menu of sports programs, including "Megaton Supoutsu Today–Puro Yakyu Sokuho" ("Megaton Sports Today–Pro Baseball Report").



Scene from "Oshin"

While critics have long inveighed against lurid commercial programming, the ever-rising level of sex and violence on the screen is beginning to prompt widespread viewer protests. Along with the novelty of TV ownership, the enthusiasm of the home audience is waning. Even the highly popular "White versus Red Singing Match," an annual New Year's Day variety extravaganza that stars Japan's best video talent, has seen its ratings decline. High as it is, overall viewership has been slipping since 1979. A 1983 NHK survey found that 42 percent of Japanese viewers considered much TV programming "monotonous."

Ironically, boredom has set in against a backdrop of rising technical quality. Among other innovations, increased cable and satellite hookups have improved and expanded reception. More importantly, NHK is on the verge of perfecting "high-definition" sets, which promise a picture five times sharper than that available anywhere in the world. If programming improves, the networks could enjoy a boom like that which swept the nation in 1960, when color TV made its Japanese debut.

counted for only 20 percent of new titles. To describe these movies, one is almost forced back to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's remark on pornography—that while he might not be able to define it, he knew it when he saw it.

Idol movies feature young singer-stars, usually wrestling with loss of innocence and the quest for identity. These rites of passage, however, differ in Japan and the United States. American-made "teenpix" such as *Porky's* and *Risky Business* feature randy boys and girls who want nothing more than to test their sexual skills. Couples in the Japanese idol movies, like determined Peter Pans, strive to remain children for as long as possible. Even in a feature as raunchy as *Pantsu No Ana* (*Hole in the Pants*), rife with sexual and scatalogical jokes, the hero and heroine never exchange so much as a chaste kiss.

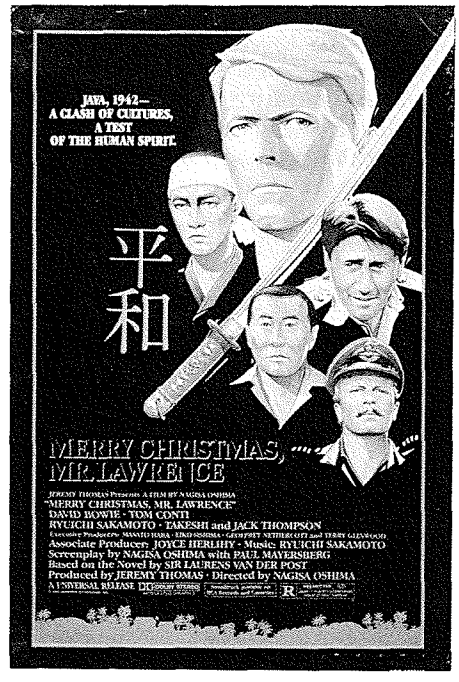
Pumping Gas

For young Japanese, the loss of innocence does not entail exchanging the constraints of adolescence for the privileges of adulthood. As Ruth Benedict notes in her famed study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946): "The arc of life in Japan is plotted in opposite fashion to that in the United States. . . . Maximum freedom and indulgence [are] allowed to babies and to the old. Restrictions are slowly increased . . . [until] having one's own way reaches a low just before and after marriage."

The familiar adolescent's question, Who am I? is answered less by declarations of independence than by a reaffirmation of social and family ties. Consequently, many idol movies involve a search for missing family members: Yamaguchi Momoe's for her father in *Uaito Rabu* (*White Love*), Tahara Toshihiko's for his brother in *Uiin Monogatari* (*Vienna Story*), Harada Tomoyo's for her father in *Aijō Monogatari* (*Curtain Call*).

That these young men and women seldom set out to find their mothers is a reflection of the typical Japanese family. Traditionally, the Japanese mother acts as a constant and close companion, often living vicariously through her children. The father remains a distant figure, devoted as much to his job as to his family. Indeed, a recent survey of salaried males disclosed that over 70 percent answered Yes to the question "Is work the most important thing in your life?"

A postwar trend toward social and economic equality, not to mention the traditional reluctance of individuals to stand out in a group-oriented society, has led to the portrayal of young characters who are the equals of—rather than the role models for—the predominantly middle-class viewers. Gone are the days of heroes



Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence *(1983), a Japanese-English co-production about a POW camp in Java, was one of the few films popular both in Tokyo and abroad.*

such as Nakamura Kinnosuke, a kabuki apprentice who appeared as a sword-wielding swashbuckler in a series of idol movies during the 1950s. Today's typical youth identifies instead with the roles played by Tahara, who works at a service station and dreams of becoming a big-league pitcher in *Sunīka Burūsu* (*Sneaker Blues*) or is a student of music in *Uiin Monogatari*.

Idol movies are also less likely to set trends than to reflect them: A trendsetter, after all, stands apart from the group. Hence, a film such as *Munasawagi No Hōkago* (*Uneasiness after School*) presents not what will be chic but what already *is* chic: high school girls strolling down a currently fashionable street, visiting a currently fashionable department store. The amazing speed with which films in Japan are shot, edited, and distributed enables them to embody what is *au courant* when it is *au courant*. Last October, for example, a local studio announced that producers of its late December release would begin shooting in early November.

Comedies are often the only films that can rival the popularity of idol movies. In 1979, they were the most profitable products for three of the four major Tokyo studios. Comedies have also employed the talents of some of Japan's newest and bright-

est directors. Vincent Canby, the *New York Times* film critic, named *Kazoku Gēmu* (*Family Game*), by Morita Yoshimitsu, one of the 10 best films of 1984. A cold-blooded satire of the middle class, Morita's film is about parents who hire a private tutor to help their son pass his university entrance exams. The tutor browbeats and humiliates the entire family, a fate they stoically endure because their son's test scores have improved.

But while Morita and other directors have recently won critical plaudits, Yamada Yōji and his 16-year-old comedy series *Otoko Wa Tsurai Yo* (*It's Hard Being a Man*) still draw the largest crowds. Semiannual installments have regularly been Shōchiku studio's top money-earning films. All told, the 34 episodes make up one of the world's longest running film series.

Good-bye to Gangsters

The series's appeal does not lie in innovative plot lines. In each installment, an itinerant peddler and ne'er-do-well named Torajirō Kuruma, or "Tora-san," as he is known affectionately, returns from his travels to try the patience of his loving and long-suffering family, which forever wonders when he will marry and settle down. An incurable romantic, Tora-san invariably falls deeply in love with what the vernacular press has dubbed his "madonna"—a geisha, an old high school classmate, a boarder at his relatives' house. And, just as invariably, he loses her.

The reasons for Tora-san's eternal appeal are twofold: his plight, and the way of life that he represents. "Humor which allows one both to laugh and to weep," note Anderson and Richie, "is particularly admired by the Japanese." Like Charlie Chaplin—widely revered in Japan—Tora-san, in his trademark checkered suit, is both funny and sad. "He is eager to help others in trouble," observes director Yamada, "but he is simple, not very smart, hasty, and is constantly misunderstanding situations."

Those misunderstandings produce the word play for which the series is renowned. In installment number 24, *Torajirō Haru No Yume* (*Torajirō's Dream of Spring*), Tora-san's family has lent his room to a luckless American salesman named Michael (pronounced "Mai-ko-ru" in Japanese). When Tora-san returns unexpectedly, his flustered sister tries to dissuade him from taking a peek at the new lodger: "Well, uh, you see, we gave your room to, ah, Maiko . . ." "A *maiko* (apprentice geisha)!" interrupts a delighted Tora-san. "Well, why didn't you say so?" Off he goes on a tangential, rapid-fire disquisition on the imagined charms of the beautiful boarder, who, in actuality, stands behind him—lanky-limbed, big-nosed, and bald.

In addition to laughter, Tora-san provides a comforting reminder of bygone days. "His clothes, his language, his outlook on life," declares film critic Ian Buruma, "suggest the long-lost world of artisans and small merchants, large families, and tightly knit neighborhood communities where the policeman knows the beancurd-maker and values are fast and firm." Above all, Tora-san and his relatives embody a traditional Japanese sensitivity and gentleness. And like Tora-san's friendly fictional neighborhood—the Tokyo *Shitamachi* (Low City) near the Sumida River—such sensitivity is disappearing amid the pressures of modern urban Japanese life.

Popular as the current cinematic fads may be in 1985, they are subject to change. Fifteen years ago, *yakuza* (gangsters) were the rage. As film critic Satō Tadao points out, gangster heroes were "loved by the Japanese, who were mostly poor and believed that they were honest while the rich were liars." Today, a better-off nation no longer dotes on the exploits of gangsters. When executives and directors with no experience of World War II take the helm at Japan's movie studios, war films, too, may disappear.

Yet inevitably, a thematic continuity among these various genres will persist. In the United States, the cinematic "death" of the Wild West cowboy was matched by the "birth" of the outer space heroes of *Star Wars*—the fight for truth, justice, and the American Way simply moved to another arena. In Japan, the *tateyaku* protagonist—strong, noble, and not given to displays of emotion—began as a stock kabuki figure. Although he has changed somewhat during his dramatic evolution (first as a samurai, then as a *yakuza*), he still exists in the current crop of World War II features.

With its ever-changing translations of age-old themes and images, popular cinema gives us a certain access to the way people think and act in the societies where such films are made. It is especially valuable in understanding Japanese society. But basing any overarching conclusions on the limited sampling offered here would be unwise. War, "foreign location," "idol," and Tora-san movies tell us this much: Japan is becoming less isolated, more worldly, and it is adopting more Western fads, habits, and ideas. In the process, the Japanese are adjusting, rather than discarding, their own traditions and beliefs. East is not yet West, nor is it ever likely to be.