

First part – History of Japanese Cinema

The importation of the Lumière brothers' cinematograph in 1897 marked the first dawn of cinema in Japan. The first moving-picture camera imported into the country was a Gaumont camera that was used on several occasions to film fashionable geishas in the traditional restaurants of Shimbashi, which was a great success with audiences. The film made from these shots of the geishas is considered to be the first film made for entertainment in Japan. In 1899, a photographic engineer named Tsunekichi Shibata made what is thought to be the first Japanese cinematographic production, a film of purely theatrical content that showcased a kabuki play named *Maple Viewing (Momijigari)*. With the importation of French equipment, France's major influence on Japanese cinema was established from the very beginning.

At the outset, the main trend in Japanese cinematography was *jidaigeki*, or cloak and dagger drama. Shortly after, contemporary drama made its appearance. The history of Japanese cinema places the trilogy *A Diary of Chūji's Travels (Chūji tabi nikki)*, made in 1927 by Daisuke Itō, at the top of the list of *jidaigeki* films. For contemporary drama, priority is given to *A Page of Madness (Kurutta Ippeiji)*, which was made in 1926 by Teinosuke Kinugasa. With the advent of the 1930s, the brilliant Sadao Yamanaka emerged on the cinematographic scene. Sadly, he was called up for military service and died of illness at the age of 29 on the front in northern China. Only three of his works have survived: *The Million Ryō Pot (Hyakuman ryō no tsubo, 1935)*, *Kōchiyama Sōshun (Kōchiyama Sōshun, 1936)* and his posthumous work *Humanity and Paper Balloons (Ninjo kamifusen, 1937)*. Sadao Yamanaka's works are particularly precious as an example of the style of pre-war Japanese cinema.

Japan lost the war on 15 August 1945. Exhausted and impoverished, the whole Japanese population experienced an extremely difficult existence. However the public, craving a diversion, streamed into the cinemas. Many films from the West were distributed and Japanese audiences were particularly fascinated by the artistic quality of French cinema.

The golden age of Japanese cinema was the 1950s, particularly the first half of the decade, when a large number of films were produced that have taken their place in the annals of film history: first and foremost, the masterpieces by Teinosuke Kinugasa, Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi, Keisuke Kinoshita and Mikio Naruse. Kaneto Shindō, a great director from the 1950s who is now 98 years old, just finished his most recent work, *Ichimai no hagaki* (which could be translated as *A Postcard*) in October 2010, on an anti-war theme.

In 1953, the television channel NHK broadcast its first programmes and the cinemas soon noticed their attendance numbers dropping. The start of the 1960s marked the arrival of new directors who were not satisfied with Japanese film production to date. They created a trend called *Shōchiku Nouvelle Vague* (from the name of a Japanese cinematographic production company). Nagisa Ōshima's *Cruel Story of Youth (Seishun zankoku monogatari, 1960)* became a real societal phenomenon. Japan also owes its close ties with the Festival de Cannes to Nagisa Ōshima, Shōhei Imamura, twice winner of the *Palme d'Or* and, of course, to Akira Kurosawa, who also won the *Palme d'Or* for *Kagemusha* in 1980.

Second part

Japanese cinema is constantly renewing itself, as the work of director Takeshi Kitano demonstrates particularly well. In his wake, an increasing number of young Japanese directors have been drawn to Cannes since 2000, and the works of art and experimentation they produce are primarily focused on garnering awards abroad rather than at home in Japan. As a result, we have seen the directors Hirokazu Koreeda and Naomi Kawase in Cannes, as well as Masahiro Kobayashi, who is better known

in Cannes than in his home country and who presented *Bashing* (*Bashingu*) in the Official Competition in 2005.

Due to the poor distribution of Western films in Japan, the works awarded the Palme d'Or at the Festival de Cannes are not adequately presented. While films like *The Class* from last June, *Uncle Boonmee*, *The White Ribbon* (Palme d'Or 2009), *Of Gods and Men* (Grand Prix 2010) and *Certified Copy* have been released, the film *Poetry* has still not been released to date. In a country where art and experimentation in cinema do not have much support, it is common for films to be released only 12 or 18 months after their presentation at the Festival de Cannes.

A film industry confronted with various problems

The situation of Japanese cinema is rather unique. In Japan, there is no public organisation similar to the French *Centre National du Cinéma* (CNC), and the management of cultural policy is relatively outdated.

In 2004, the CNC signed a memorandum of cooperation with Japan that only sets out a certain number of issues on which common efforts must be undertaken.

Today, the main question that preoccupies the world of Japanese cinematography is the absence of a public film school. Moreover, directors do not receive any royalties because, ever since the pre-war period, these rights have been relinquished to production companies. The system governing the legal copyrighting of films also remains inadequate. Moreover, the activity of cinemas for artistic and experimental film is very underdeveloped.

The current situation in Japanese cinema

Cinema became the ultimate form of entertainment in Japan as early as the pre-war years and particularly between 1945 and 1958, the year it attained its zenith with 1.12 billion spectators. Subsequently, with the advent of television, this number diminished significantly. The most recent statistics indicate 162.2 million spectators per year. On average, the Japanese go to the cinema 1.3 times per year, which is approximately three times less than the French or South Koreans. Annual sales in 2010 were approximately ¥220 billion (€2.42 billion), which positions Japan as a major film market, placed just behind the USA.

This contradictory situation is primarily due to the cost of a cinema ticket: in Tokyo and even in Osaka, a ticket can cost up to ¥1,800 full price, ¥1,500 for students and ¥1,000 for people over the age of 60. This price makes up financially for the reduced attendance. On average, a cinema ticket costs €6.14 in France, €5.1 in Korea, \$7.50 dollars in the US, and Japan is the exception with a high cost of ¥1,217 (or €11.06). One can thus argue that the Japanese film industry is supported by the high price of tickets.

Commentary by Takeshi Kitano

The Festival de Cannes and me

The Festival that left the most profound impression on me was the 52nd Festival de Cannes in 1999, the year that *Kikujiro* (*Kikujirō no natsu*) was screened in competition. I remember the audience's enthusiastic applause, which seemed like it would never stop, and the acclamations after the official screening as if it were just yesterday. To this very day, that applause remains in my memory as an unequalled experience, a real storm. During the official screenings at the Festival de Cannes, one of the greatest fears of directors is the sound of the seats clapping shut, as spectators rise to leave.

Mentally, this noise hits us as if we were prisoners hearing our death sentence. Throughout the screening, as our eyes are glued to the screen, our ears are tuned to the sounds of the seats, like a submarine sonar. During the screening of *Kikujiro*, this feeling of tension was suspended and it was only when the credits began to roll that I suddenly realised I had not heard the sound of the seats. When the audience began to cry out “bravo!” and applaud. This precious experience stimulated me and I continue making films today because of it. Film festivals help filmmakers to mature. I also had another valuable experience at the Festival de Cannes. It was in 2007, for the 60th anniversary of the event, when I took part in a project called *To Each His Own Cinema* which put me in contact with numerous talented directors from all over the world. Having the opportunity to participate in this project was a great honour for me, but the most precious moment was the rehearsal for the opening ceremony, where even as I was speaking, I could see the silhouettes of all these masters before me. It was an amazing moment. I still think even today that I should have filmed it for audiences to enjoy.

Commentary by Kōji Yakusho

A respect for the cinema

I believe that the audiences who come to see films at the Festival de Cannes have a true passion for film, and it is in Cannes that I first understood how many people love the cinema. I had the clear impression that the entire Festival held the director Shōhei Imamura in high esteem. In Japan, I had not sensed this feeling of respect for actors and directors.

As I was extremely stressed, I hardly remember going up the red carpet. Of course, I remember a few fleeting impressions, but unfortunately, as Shōhei Imamura had difficulty walking, we were unable to go up together. I remember being very impressed seeing him with his cane in the company of the President Gilles Jacob, as I glanced at the entrance of the Palais des Festivals while I climbed the stairs. I was moved that a film shot in such a small city as Sawara, in Japan, could be received in such a lively place as an international film festival. And when I heard the soundtrack to *The Eel*, I felt even greater joy. My heart began to beat very fast.

For the awards ceremony, Mr Imamura was obliged to return to Japan and I got up on stage in the company of director Abbas Kiarostami, Palme d’Or ex-aequo: I have the photo that was taken of the two of us on display at my home. I was in a state of complete panic on the day of the awards ceremony. I had thought I would visit Paris and spend a night there before returning home, when the producer called me in. And when I ascended the red carpet, Gilles Jacob whispered to me: “I don’t think you will be disappointed”. And yet, I still did not expect the Palme d’Or. The award was presented by Catherine Deneuve. I was moved that a film produced in Japan, this little island in the Far East, would be seen by so many European spectators and I could feel the profound respect that their applause showed for the film in my whole body. I thought its director was a real star.

I had not made many films until then, but it was this Festival de Cannes that helped me decide I wanted to devote myself to it full time.

Yōkichi Nakagawa