

<BOOK REVIEW>Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age, by Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano

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BOOK REVIEW

Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age

Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano

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Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano's latest book, *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, adopts a timely and refreshing approach that goes beyond a simple cultural hermeneutics by structuring the discussion of contemporary Japanese film around questions of technological change. This concern with the materiality of "film," the implications of celluloid's demise in favour of digital contents, is very much in keeping with current trends within the discipline of film studies pioneered by scholars such as D.N. Rodowick. Within Wada-Marciano's study, this technology-based discourse is also framed within a discussion of the relevance of conceptual paradigms such as "national" and "transnational" cinema, as tools through which to analyse "cinema culture." As Wada-Marciano explains in her introductory chapter, "*Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age* investigates how the new media, primarily computer and digital technologies, have impacted the flow of cinema culture, especially in the global commodification of such regional genre films. Within these technological advances and the new cinematic flow, contemporary cinemas often express the transnational as an object of desire, a desire that is nonetheless inseparable from national identity" (pp. 1–2).

In chapter one she illustrates this premise by expanding on her paper previously published in *Horror to the Extreme*.¹ Her argument is that digital platforms have so altered distribution networks in the post-studio era that culturally specific genres, once deemed unsuitable for foreign markets, are now readily exportable. "J-horror's assimilation with new digital technology enabled it to cross market boundaries, despite its culturally specific images, such as a ghost with a white painted body theatrically stylized like a Butoh dance performer and a vengeful woman figure with long black hair" (p. 43). Chapter two takes this argument further by linking changing technologies of filmmaking—digitalization—to a new aesthetic which incorporates documentary-style practices—location shooting—within fictional films. This, she argues, marks a clear distinction between the work of Japanese post-war documentary filmmakers in the Ogawa Shinsuke tradition and contemporary filmmakers such as Kore'eda Hirokazu and Kawase Naomi. Technological changes have "resulted in a blurring of boundaries between film and video, fiction and documentary..." (p. 25) the result of which has been a "new authenticity" in contemporary

¹ Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, eds. *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*. Hong Kong University Press, 2009.

Japanese documentary. She explains: “What seems new in recent Japanese documentary practice is a mode of authenticity that requires a new definition, distinct from either real or genuine in a literal sense connoted with a quality of seeming to exist, a sense of reality expressed in the vernacular term *riaruna*...It is an authenticity constructed in the process of viewing, particularly in the scale and close proximity of the viewer’s everyday life” (p. 53).

Taking an innovative line, chapter three focuses not on the cultural determinants of anime, but on “how technological developments in media have shaped anime production and stylistic diversity...” (p. 26). Therefore, anime is analysed “in light of its affinity with media convergence... (televisions, videos, laser discs, DVDs, personal computers, Blu-ray Discs etc.)...” (p. 75). Expository examples are taken from the works of Shinkai Makoto and Yamamura Kōji, both of whom rely on a “personal scale of production in Japanese animation, now possible through home-based digital technology...” (p. 75). Chapter four marks a shift in the book’s discourse from digitalization and its impact on content to a consideration of the relevance of critical conceptions such as “national” and “transnational” cinema in the context of multinational finance, cross-boarder flows of stars and filmmakers, and diversified distribution outlets. “This chapter examines the issue of transnational cinema from dual angles: on the level of discursive construction in film studies and on the level of film texts, especially in terms of space, identity and language” (p. 27). This theme is then extended in chapter five to a discussion of “ethnic cinema” through an analysis of *Blood and Bones* (2004), which stars Beat Takeshi as the stereotypical *zainichi* anti-hero of Sai Yōichi’s film. The chapter considers why the film failed internationally, despite the director’s stated aim of attracting a foreign audience and despite receiving critical acclaim in Japan. Thus the chapter “seeks to understand the Japanese attraction to *Blood and Bones* by examining the connection between the cinematic affect, such as violence, and its relation to cultural knowledge associated with ethnic minorities in Japan” (p. 115).

The book’s central hypothesis—that, despite the homogenizing influences of globalization in the economies of production and digitalization, cultural specificity is still an important criterion in defining national cinemas—is well argued. Moreover, as this is one of the first books to deal specifically with Japanese cinema culture in the post-studio era, it undoubtedly raises many questions and will provoke many further studies.

Reviewed by Isolde Standish