

## The Death of the *Auteur*: Japanese Cinema in the Post-Studio Era

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The recession that began in Japan in the late-1980s was first defined as a ‘lost decade’; but has now extended into a third decade. However, despite the downturn in manufacturing exports in the 1990s, exports from the ‘cultural industries’ increased. ‘Export amounts and income from...culture-related products and services more than tripled from a combined total of nearly ¥2,539 billion (US\$25.4 billion) by 2006’<sup>1</sup>. ‘In 2003, *anime* alone was a five-billion-dollar business, over three times the value of Japanese steel exports to the United States. This market has continued to grow rapidly; the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) reports that Japanese *anime* DVD exports to the United States had increased dramatically from 2.1 million units in 2000 to 12 million units in 2005 [and] 60 percent of all cartoon shows on television throughout the world [are] made in Japan’<sup>2</sup>. However, as these figures indicate, while Japanese ‘cultural products’ are experiencing an unprecedented ‘boom’ in international markets, this paper asks how does the film industry (in the historical sense of cinema) fit into the equation?

In 2012 two English language books were published focusing on the ‘global’ and ‘transnational’ aspects of Japanese filmmaking – Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano’s *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age* and Yoshiharu Tezuka’s *Japanese Cinema Goes Global: a Filmmakers Journeys*. While both books provide fascinating insights into Japanese films and the industry predominantly in relation to the export market, neither dwells on issues relating to the domestic market for which increasingly the majority of Japanese films are made. In 2011 Japanese film exports accounted for a mere 4.6% of the total box-office earnings<sup>3</sup>. In this research, I am attempting to redress this imbalance by examining changes within the industry in Japan at the turn of the century that have resulted in a strengthening of domestic filmmaking for domestic audiences at a time when other East Asian film industries, namely China and South Korea, are increasingly and aggressively seeking audiences abroad. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Tsutomu Sugiura, ‘Japan’s Creative Industries: Culture as a Source of Soft Power in the Industrial Sector’, in Mark W. MacWilliams (ed), *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*. (Armonk, New York and London, England: M.E. Sharp, 2008), p141.

<sup>2</sup> Mark W. MacWilliams, ‘Introduction’ to *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*. (Armonk, New York and London, England: M.E. Sharp, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Kakeo Yoshio, *Nihon Eiga no Sekai Shinshutsu*, (Tokyo: Kinema Junpō, 2012), p. 4.

taking up Graeme Turner's premise that changes in industrial structures produces textual effects<sup>4</sup> I am also concerned to focus on various issues in relation to contemporary Japanese film content. In particular, I am interested in the place of the *auteur* in the contemporary industry.

In this research, I am concerned with how structural changes within the industry have contributed to the fact that contemporary Japanese films receive little international critical acclaim, (Kore'eda Hirokazu withstanding). This point was highlighted by Kenzō Horikoshi in his 2011 article 'The Place of Japanese Film in the Global Age' (*Gurōbaru jidai ni okeru Nihon eiga no yukue*). This, I think, is particularly relevant when one considers the international recognition afforded Japanese independent films in the 1960s, and early 1970s. In short, in this research I am exploring how 'film', politics, and the market interact. In terms of politics, internationally certain cinematic traditions are seen as symbolic of national identity and 'soft power' in Joseph Nye's terms. It is precisely at this juncture where political considerations confront the market through such institutions as the Japan Foundation and JETRO in their attempts at gaining foreign distribution for Japanese films at international film festivals amongst other initiatives.

The promotion of Japanese cultural products for export formed part of a package of conservative, government policies relating to 'marketization' part of which included a major restructuring of domestic employment practices from the vaunted 'cradle to grave' system of the post-war compact to more precarious structures. The deregulation of the media in the 1990s accompanied digitalization and included the break-up and privatisation of the telephone network NTT. Japan turned off the analogue television system and switched to digital on 24 June, 2011. However, digital was first available in Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka from 2003 and was available throughout the country by 2006. These restructuring policies in the telecommunications and media industries were in line with international trends, as Hesmondhalgh argues;

governments altered their telecommunications and broadcasting policies in the 1980s and 1990s to encourage the development of the commercial cultural industries by privatising public corporations and "loosening" the regulation of media and culture<sup>5</sup>.

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the cultural industries, has been keen to capitalize on what Douglas McGray described, in his influential article of 2002, as a growing sense of Japan's 'Gross National Cool'. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs Asō Tarō, made a speech in April 2006 in which he proposed building a partnership between the Ministry and the 'creative industries'. He is quoted as saying; 'I think we can safely say that any kind of cultural diplomacy that fails to take advantage of pop culture is not really worthy of being called cultural diplomacy'. He continued, speaking of a need for an 'all Japan partnership between Japan's public and private sectors to market Japanese contemporary culture'. He explained that the Ministry would work on a 'framework through

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<sup>4</sup> Graeme Turner, 'The End of the National Project? Australian Cinema in the 1990s' in Wimal Dissanayake (ed) *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*. (London: Sage, 2013), p. 13.

which content originating in Japan can more easily be spread around the globe'<sup>6</sup>. Historically, the Japan Foundation has been central to the promotion of Japanese 'soft power' through the promotion of Japanese cultural industries in the international arena.

Concurrently with the expansion of Japan's cultural industries in the international arena, in the 1990s, throughout East Asia media industries underwent huge structural changes. As with Japan, these changes were prompted by international agreements (such as the founding of the World Trade Organisation in 1995 and the signing of the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights in 1994), and similarly included the privatisation of telecommunications industries, and the 'loosening' of regulations governing the media. 'The US pressured South Korea to drop its screen quotas as part of the 1998-99 negotiations on a Bilateral Investment Treaty'<sup>7</sup>. And in 2006, the South Korean government reduced its screen quota again as part of a Free Trade Agreement with the USA<sup>8</sup>. China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and that same year, 'the National People's Congress ratified the concept of cultural industries (*wenhua chanye*). At this stage...the concept embodied the Chinese leadership's aspiration not only to develop its big companies in the area of film, television, publishing, crafts and tourism, but also to maintain control'<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, as Davis and Yeh argue, these globalising trends combined with advances in digital technology opened up East Asian markets to Western multinational media companies such as News Corp; Star TV being a case in point, beginning transmission to Asia in 1991. Drawn by this huge potential market, CNN, BBC, MTV, HBO and Disney have all been lured into Asian broadcasting<sup>10</sup>. In response to these intrusions into domestic markets and as a bid to capitalize on their own cultural/creative industries, in the late 1990s and 2000s East Asian governments shifted the emphasis of their policies from protectionism to the active promotion of their film and content industries. In the case of mainland China, Barr states:

In July 2010 the government issued a major directive to promote the competitiveness of China's cultural industry. *A Plan to Reinvigorate the Culture Industry* set out plans to form a culture industry investment fund, financed by central government with support from state-owned cultural enterprises and China's leading financial institutions<sup>11</sup>.

As with China, the South Korean film industry 'has been and continues to be tightly controlled by the South Korean government'<sup>12</sup> and has been similarly expanding its support for the film industry, through the establishment of the Korean Film Academy as early as 1984<sup>13</sup> and the founding of the

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<sup>6</sup> Yoshiko Nakano, 'Shared Memories: Japanese Pop Culture in China', in Yasushi Wantanabe and David I. McConnell (eds), *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell, Ting Wang. *Global Hollywood 2*. (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> Jinhee Choi. *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers Global Provocateurs*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *The Cultural Industries*, p 178.

<sup>10</sup> Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, *East Asian Screen Industries*. (London: BFI, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Barr, *Who's Afraid of China?: the Challenge of Chinese Soft Power* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2011), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

Korean Film Council (KOFIC). In more recent times, the focus is shifting to including co-productions, through the planned development of the Global Studio, to be built in the Busan Cinema Studio<sup>14</sup>. Six Global Studio buildings, outdoor sets and production support facilities are scheduled for completion in the early 2020s. This involvement of both the Chinese and South Korean governments in their respective film industries contains two aspects, on the one hand, there is the straightforward desire to make the local product competitive in the international arena, while on the other hand, and intimately linked to the economic, is the question of the protection, and perhaps more importantly the projection, of local culture and a ‘national identity’.

In the case of Japan, government interventions in the industry have historically been indirect (that is, apart from the infamous film laws beginning in 1939). However, in 2002 the Agency for Cultural Affairs set up a series of meetings to consider how to promote and preserve the Japanese film industry. The meetings were attended by government representatives from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, and the Ministry of Land Infrastructure and Transport. Also in attendance were representatives from the film industry the Motion Picture Producers Association, the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters, the Japan Association of Theatre Owners, and the Japan Council of Performers. Representatives from the Film Centre, then connected to the Tokyo Museum of Modern Art, were also included. From May 2002, the central committee divided into four sub-groups which met for a further four meetings to refine recommendations around production, distribution and exhibition, the preservation of Japan’s cinema heritage, and the education and training of industry personnel.

A twelve-point plan for the revival of Japanese cinema was agreed. The following is summarized from a consultation paper published in the journal *Kinema junpō* No 1374 February, 2003: The committee justified the need for government intervention in the domestic film industry on the following grounds: First, acknowledging the one-hundred year history of Japanese cinema, the paper makes the point that as a ‘media art’ cinema is ‘mass’ by its nature. Therefore, over the years:

Cinema has acquired two facets, while films are an entertainment commodity, they are also cultural products that contain the sentiments and ideas of a period. Films express the circumstances of a particular period and the culture of a country or region, while also indicating that [particular] culture’s specific characteristics<sup>15</sup>.

Secondly, in relation to national life, the paper argues that cinema is a good entertainment form in times of recession and in view of Japan’s ageing population provides a good form of inexpensive public entertainment. Thirdly, this is the age of ‘information technology’ and central to IT is the ‘image’. Historically, cinema’s links with the image place it at the centre of contemporary life. Regarding the preservation of early Japanese films, the paper stresses that these have value as part of Japan’s cultural heritage, but it also makes the point that early cinema is being re-appraised and has commercial value.

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<sup>14</sup> Korean Film Council, *Korean Cinema 2013* (Busan: Kofic, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Kinema junpō*, no. 1374, February, (2003) p.225 my translation.

Fourthly, films are a means of promoting Japanese culture abroad. With the end of the Cold War, the paper reasons, various conflicts based on race, culture and religion are increasing throughout the world. The promotion of cultural understanding, it is suggested, will ease these conflicts. Hollywood is cited as an example of how cinema disseminated American cultural values to the world. And fifthly, this section concludes with an appeal for a policy to promote the national cinema industry in all its facets – the preservation of existing films, support for production, and support for distribution and exhibition both at home and abroad.

One of the effects of this shift in government policy, as it has emerged in critical debates in Japan, was a re-appraisal of the relationship of cinema to the nation state. Here we have the paradox; while at one level the transnational nature of the cultural industries is seemingly eroding national borders, the Japanese government is in part concerned to re-assess the efficacy of cinema as a means to promote domestic film as a vehicle to encourage cultural understanding and promote a ‘national identity’ on an international level. And this is where government policy as outlined in the discussion document is at odds with the reality.

According to the logic of neo-liberal economies of production under which Japanese domestic films are now made (*seisaku iinkai* discussed below), only films that are viable by market criteria are produced. Ironically, Japan’s recent international commercial success with animation and gaming (both hardware and software) has been based on a policy of *mukokuseki*. *Mukokuseki* (the erasing of national identity from cultural products sold outside Japan) which, as Iwabuchi argues ‘simultaneously articulates the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and the disappearance of any perceptible “Japaneseness”’<sup>16</sup>. This concept of Japanese software/hardware as having universal appeal through *mukokuseki* has come to dominate gaming and much *anime* as seen through the international success of Sony, *Pokémon*, *Doraemon* and some Studio Ghibli productions such as *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2005) and *Ponyo* (2008), and Katsuhiro Ōtomo *Steam Boy* (2004). However, in a world where the cultural industries are indeed increasingly ‘global’ in reach and ‘transnational’ in appeal, the Japanese commercial film industry is increasingly turning inward and relying on its large domestic audience for profits. This is in contravention to overall trends in East Asia which have seen the development of internationalized commercial cinemas in mainland China and South Korea. ‘By 2005 South Korea had become the fifth largest theatrical market in the world, with \$890 million in box office receipts’<sup>17</sup>. Thus despite government policy aims to internationalise the Japanese film industry as a means to promote Japanese culture abroad as stated in the discussion paper, the much heralded revival of the Japanese film industry in the 2000s is primarily built upon loyal local consumption which raises many questions both in terms of how the Japanese film industry quantifies success, as according to Horikoshi, only one in ten locally produced films recoups its production costs at the box office<sup>18</sup>, and in terms of ‘quality’

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<sup>16</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Choi. *The South Korean Film Renaissance*. p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Kenzō Horikoshi, ‘Gurōbaru jidai ni okeru Nihon eiga no yukue’ in Kiyoshi. Kurosawa and Inuhoko Yomota (eds), *Nihon Eiga wa dokomade ikuka* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2011), p. 37.

of content (here I am following *Kinema junpō* critics in defining ‘quality’ in terms of international ‘critical acclaim’).

Equally, Japanese investment in Hollywood in the 1980s did nothing to promote Japanese films in the international arena (Sony purchased Columbia Pictures for \$3.4 billion, Matsushita purchased MCA-Universal for \$6 billion). The aim of Sony et al was to become major players in the global media production system. Indeed, they were instrumental in making Hollywood ‘global’ in the sense used by Toby Miller et al in *Global Hollywood 2*. ‘Their priority was thus to acquire globally popular content, regardless of its national origin, and they naturally assessed the “global popular” to be western in origins, not Japanese’<sup>19</sup>. As such, foreign films came to dominate the domestic market in the 1980s and Japanese *auteur*-defined filmmakers were forced to find funding from abroad. For example, Akira Kurosawa made *Dersu Uzala* (1975) funded by Mosfilm, *Kagemusha* (1980) was a joint production between Tōhō and Hollywood’s Twentieth Century Fox, and *Ran* (1985) was funded by a consortium that included the French producer Serge Silberman. Commenting on the Japanese film industry in the 1980s Kurosawa laments:

I feel that what’s wrong with the Japanese film industry today is that the marketing side has taken over the decision-making power on what film is going to be made. There’s no way that marketing-type people – at the level their brains are at – can understand what’s going to be a good film and what isn’t, and it’s really a mistake to give them hegemony over all this. The film companies have become defensive. The only way to compete with television is to make *real* films. Until this situation is corrected, it’s really going to be difficult for filmmakers in Japan<sup>20</sup>

As one round-table discussion published in *Kinema junpō* chaired by the film critic Hirō Ōtaka asked ‘is film a work of art (*sakuhin*) or a commodity (*shōhin*)’<sup>21</sup>. And this, in other words, is the nub of the question; in the post studio era the locus of production has shifted from creative individuals to the market as audience preferences studied through market research take precedence. This is not to argue that the studios did not carry out market research, but that now, through digital technologies and the increasing power of algorithms to predict and individualise spectator/audience preferences, the emphasis has shifted.

After the protracted collapse of the studio-system of production in Japan starting in the 1960s, by the 2000s the economies of cinema had gradually shifted to a ready-made-hit ‘consortia system’ (*seisaku iinkai*) of production funding. This shift towards a post-studio ‘production consortia’ structure for the financing and production of domestic films in the 1990s has had a huge impact on both how, and which films are made. As Yomota explains:

Production consortia are constructed according to the enterprise; they are made up of publishing

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<sup>19</sup> Yoshiharu Tezuka, *Japanese Cinema Goes Global: Filmworkers’ Journeys* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Prince, *The Warrior’s Camera: the Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Hirō Ōtaka, ‘Nihon eigakai no paradaimu chienji wa nani o kowasi, nani o umidasu no ka’, *Kinema junpō*, no. 1542, October, (2009), p. 32.



houses, newspaper companies, advertising agencies and entertainment companies, but it is the television companies that have overall authority. The television companies, more than any of the other companies [that make up the consortium], have priority when it comes to marketing. Because they cover the whole country they spread the publicity and ensure profits. Investors are assembled based on information gathered through surveys of audiences'; the consumers' demands (*yōkyū*) [...] The screenplay writer and the actors are agreed upon, finally, a director is summoned. It has become a very rare thing for a filmmaker to put forward a project. Therefore, under this system Japanese films have gradually entered a [new] period of mass production<sup>22</sup>.

Indeed, it is a structure that relies heavily on the domestic market. This is due in large part to both the use of popular *manga*, novels, and television series as the narrative basis for films, and the dominate position of the television companies within the consortia structure. These financial investment convergences within the cinema market between television, publishing, and film companies, have had a profound impact on film content and the role of the director/filmmaker as *auteur* within domestic production. In other words, a radical shift has occurred in the post-studio era from the promotion of the director/filmmaker as a publicity and advertising vehicle through critical notions of the *auteur* circulated through institutional and commercial agencies, to their displacement in favour of television stars, and the authors of the novels and *manga* series upon which the films are based.

In concluding, the tensions between commerce and creativity have always been a fundamental feature of the film industry. However, under the 'consortia system' of production this has become more pronounced. The dominance of this form of corporate production is such that for most filmmakers working in contemporary Japan, the most available employment relations are those where the ideas for films come from new professional intermediaries – the television companies and publishing houses – with filmmakers being employed to execute them. This situation has been confirmed in journals such as *Kinema junpō* which have carried on an often bitter discourse around issues of 'quality' which is seen to have been diminished as a result of the marginalisation of the filmmaker as creator in favour of the purely market defined approach of the new corporate structures of production.

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<sup>22</sup> Inuhiko Yomota, 'Nihon eiga no atarashi'i fukuin no tame ni', in Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Inuhiko Yomota (eds), *Nihon no Eiga wa Ikite iru* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2010) pp. 11-12. my translation.

## 「映画作家 (auteur)」の死：

ポストスタジオ時代の日本映画

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キーワード：新自由主義（ネオリベラル）、ナショナル・シネマ、文化産業、  
コンソーシアムシステム、映画作家 (auteur)

21世紀への転換期、日本映画産業内部に構造的変化が生じたが、本稿では、その変化がいかにして、国際的な高評価を（是枝裕和をのぞいて）ほとんど得ていない現代日本映画の実情の一因となっているかを考察する。この論点は、堀越謙三が2011年の論文「グローバル時代における日本映画の行方」で強調し、映画批評家の大高宏雄が2006年に発表した一連の論文で予言していたものである。このことは1960年代および1970年度初頭の日本インデペンデント映画に対する国際的評価を考慮するとき、とりわけ今日的な意義を帯びるだろう。すなわち、本論考が検討するのは、いかに「映画」、政治、市場が相互に作用しているかということである。政治の観点からいえば、国際関係上、ある種の映画的伝統は国民的アイデンティティのシンボルである、ジョセフ・ナイのいう「ソフト・パワー」であると見なされている。それはまさしく、政治的な思惑が国際交流基金や日本貿易振興機構（ジェトロ）といった機関を通じて市場と対峙する結節点に置かれているのである。にもかかわらず、2011年の日本映画の輸出は、全興行収入のわずか4.6パーセントを占めるにすぎなかった。本論考では、世紀転換期に生じた日本映画産業内部の変化が、ますます精力的に海外での観客獲得に乗り出している他の東アジア映画産業、すなわち中国や韓国に対し、国内の観客を対象とした国内向けの映画製作を強化する結果を招いた日本のいきさつについて考察する。さらには、産業構造の変化は言説に作用するというグレアム・ターナーの仮説にもとづき、現代日本映画の内容に関する種々の問題点に焦点をあてたい。とりわけ着目したいのは現代映画産業における「映画作家」の位置づけについてである。