Experimental Film, Japan

Cinematic experimentation in Japan has a long history extending back to the dawn of the medium itself, with Kinugasa Teinosuke’s *Kurutta ichipeiji* (*A Page of Madness*, 1926) being the most prominent early example. Created in collaboration with leading modernist writers (known as the *Shinkankaku* or ‘new impressionist’ school in Japan) including Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari, the film conveys a subverted view of the world by fully exploring the formal and technical devices known at the time. However, experimental film, often used interchangeably with the term ‘avant-garde’ film or ‘underground’ film in Japan, has typically been associated with the emergence of radical and creative filmmaking practices in the 1960s. Coinciding with a particular phase of cinematic modernism across the globe, experimental films in Japan tested the political and formal boundaries of the cinematic medium. The role of cinema in political activism of the time was closely correlated with the generational sense of frustration and betrayal engendered after the perceived failure of demonstrations against the renewal of the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Pact in 1960. The anger and disillusionment shared by the youth were the primary motives behind the so-called Japanese New Wave movement over the same period. Indeed, some of the key players of the New Wave, including Oshima Nagisa, Teshigahara Hiroshi, Matsumoto Toshio (whose theory of “avant-garde documentary” was celebrated), and Hani Susumu, were simultaneously engaging with innovative possibilities of the medium.

The major institutional driving forces that generated a diverse variety of experimental cinemas were the Sogetsu Art Center and the Art Theatre Guild (ATG). Sogetsu Art Center, founded in 1958 with Teshigahara Hiroshi as its director, promoted an environment where avant-garde artists gathered and collaborated across disciplinary boundaries. Teshigahara Hiroshi later teamed up with the writer Abe Kobo and the composer Takemitsu Toru to make internationally acclaimed features with experimental edges, including *Suna no onna* (*Woman in the Dunes,* 1964). As an independent production formed in 1961, ATG provided a venue where cinephiles could immerse themselves in foreign arthouse cinema, while also becoming a benefactor for young and aspiring creators to venture into independent projects. Given complete artistic autonomy, such ‘underground’ films as Hani’s *Hatsukoi: Jigokuhen* (*Nanami: The Inferno of First Love*, 1968) and Matsumoto’s *Bara no soretsu* (*Funeral Parade of Roses*, 1969) fully demonstrated the avant-garde filmmaking endorsed by ATG. The company also offered an artistically interactive environment wherein non-filmmakers could embark on intermedial experimentation. Terayama Shuji, the dramatist and writer, directed *Tomato Kechappu Kotei* (*Emperor Tomato Ketchup* , 1971) and other ambitious avant-garde films with the support of ATG. Terayama’s continuing activities facilitated the formation of the Underground Center, which eventually became Image Forum, one of the most crucial institutions that foster experimental filmmaking practice today.

Filmmaking collectives also played significant roles, in part to remain free of commercial constraints. Obayashi Nobuhiko, Takabayashi Yoichi, and Iimura Takahiko founded Group Independant in 1963. While eventually becoming one of the leading mainstream directors in Japan, Obayashi produced early experimental works such as *Complexe* (*Complex*, 1964) and *Emotion* (*Emotion,* 1967). Numerous films were created by study groups or artist collectives in the 1960s and 1970s – the Documentary Art Group, Film and Criticism Group, Nihon University Film Study Group, and Zero Jigen just to name a few – where filmmakers such as Donald Richie, Adachi Masao, Kanai Katsu, Jonouchi Motoharu, Donald Richie and Kuri Yoji as well as the aforementioned New Wave directors maximized an interdisciplinary network of creative and experimental minds to create groundbreaking work.

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Paratextual Material

<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3059-woman-in-the-dunes-golden-anniversary>

(Trailer: Teshigahara’s *Woman in the Dunes*)

<http://mp3itik.com/video/Funeral-Parade-Of-Roses-%7C-1969-%7C-Trailer-%7C-Toshio-Matsumoto-%7C-Bara-no-s%C3%B4retsu-%7C-Japan/ZucjIDhEwA4/>

(Trailer: Matsumoto’s *Funeral Parade of Roses*)

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