Japanese New Wave

What constituted the Japanese New Wave is still fiercely debated by scholars, critics, cinephiles and filmmakers. Similar to its counterpart in France, it was, on the one hand, a movement in cinematic modernism led by younger and rebellious filmmakers – notably Oshima Nagisa, Yoshida Yoshishige and Shinoda Masahiro – who condemned directors of the older generation as ossified and lacking a conscious engagement with the social and political reality of the time. David Desser’s seminal work on the Japanese New Wave cinema of the 1960s, for instance, offers a film history strongly centered on the generational sense of frustration and betrayal engendered after the perceived failure of the political demonstrations against the renewal of the Japan-US Mutual Security Pact in 1960. Oshima's *Seishun zankoku monogatari* (*Cruel Story of Youth,* 1960), often cited as the inaugural film of the New Wave, is a highly politicized tour de force filled with an activist logic fuelled by the anger of youth. The film showcased the aesthetic and thematic features of the New Wave cinema, especially the sense of immediacy strongly tied with sexuality and delinquency.

On the other hand, the movement occurred within the commercial studio system, as the term Japanese New Wave itself was a variant of the "Shochiku Nouvelle Vague" that the Shochiku studio used in publicity. The above-mentioned trio, for instance, all emerged from Shochiku and could be said to internalize company strategies while also undermining its system from within. This institutional label remained in circulation to nominate their works even after their exits from the company. Other directors slightly older than Oshima’s generation, such as Nakahira Ko, Suzuki Seijun and Masumura Yasuzo, who mostly continued on in the major studios, also shared pressing concerns and innovative visual styles with those who embraced the spirit of the New Wave. In this sense, the quasi-Oedipal narrative did not necessarily describe an individual matter autonomous from larger institutional operations. Still, Oshima's departure from Shochiku in 1961 did mark the beginning of a genuine sector of independent production, and his overt animosity toward authoritative "big companies" was celebrated as politically radical filmmaking. The Art Theatre Guild (ATG), an independent production initially formed in 1961 as an exhibition and distribution company specializing in foreign imports, first became a major benefactor and alternative venue for Oshima and other New Wave filmmakers. Although fuelling the growth of the New Wave in Japan, ATG was also in large part owned by Toho, another giant studio of the time.

Other directors often associated with ATG include Imamura Shohei, Hani Susumu, Kuroki Kazuo, Matsumoto Toshio and Teshigahara Hiroshi. Imamura, just like the aforementioned directors, began working for the major studios (Shochiku and then Nikkatsu), managing a greater degree of creative license that would exploit the confines of the (supposedly) restrictive industrial system. His first collaboration with ATG, *Ningen johatsu* (*A Man Vanishes,* 1967), was an ambitious pseudo-documentary project that critically de-constructed its own generic boundaries. Hani, Kuroki, Matsumoto, and Teshigahara all emerged outside the major studio system and were more deeply rooted in documentary filmmaking practice. Curiously enough, Hani, Kuroki and Matsumoto started their careers at firms making PR films (Hani and Kuroki at Iwanami and Matsumoto at Riken), marginal productions ostensively remote from the movement. Teshigahara, most known for the international triumph of his *Suna no onna* (*Woman in the Dunes,* 1964), began working in avant-garde documentary as a member of filmmaking collectives that other New Wave directors, including Oshima, also frequented.

Reference and further reading

- Desser, D. (1988) *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema,* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

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Paratextual Material

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMynWmGTj3Q>

(Trailer: Oshima’s *Cruel Story of Youth*)

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