

Catherine Russell's Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited

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Catherine Russell's *Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited*

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Translations issues related to film studies, even though they were ignored for a long time due in part to the primacy of the visual, have gained more prevalence in recent years. This can be explained by the desire of some critics to understand the specificities of a national cinema within a transnational context. Catherine Russell's book, *Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited*, using the controversial concept of classical cinema as well as ideas rooted in translation studies (especially the idea of a bilingual scholar and the work of Naoki Sakai on cultural translation¹) in order to reconsider films that were produced mostly between 1920's and 1960's sheds a new light on the work of some of the most famous Japanese filmmakers of this period (Ozu Yasujiro, Mizoguchi Kenji, Kurosawa Akira, Naruse Mikio, Ichikawa Kon and Kobayashi Masaki). Even though she writes comprehensive studies of specific movie directors, she avoids analysis based on auteurism, prevalent until recently amongst scholars of Japanese cinema, in favor of a more contextual approach that takes into account the importance of the Japanese studio system as well as the political, economic and cultural environment at the time of production. She also advocates for the need to avoid an orientalist perspective when analyzing Japanese movies. Many Western critics and filmmakers have been captivated by what they perceive to be the radical newness of Japanese cinema but, according to

¹ See Naoki Sakai, "You Asians": On the Historical Role of the West and Asia binary", in *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, edited by Tomioko Yoda and Harry Harootunian, pp. 167-194 (quoted in Russell's book) and *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, 231 p.

Russell, they often ignore (sometimes purposefully) the influence of Hollywood cinema and the general context of production. This misunderstanding can be straightened out by a better understanding of the context of the production of these movies. This can be achieved through reading newspapers articles published at the time of a movie's release or examining interviews with or memoirs of the people involved in the making of the films. The feeling of immediacy of the cinematic medium often makes someone forget the importance of knowing the language and the culture of a filmmaker in order to avoid obvious misunderstandings. Thus, in the preface of her book, Russell writes about the need of taking into account Japanese language in order to understand Japanese movies.

As more bilingual scholarship reveals and analyzes the complexity of the cultural context of this commercial industry, the "classics" of Japanese cinema can begin to be understood as part of a classical cinema, with all the social, political, historical and ideological implications of the American film industry. (p.xii)

Scholars can become translators capable of giving Western audiences a better understanding of Japanese movies by avoiding essentialism, exoticism or orientalism. In this context, these scholars / translators reveal and create new meaning and contribute to cultural exchanges within a transnational context, because they look at movies from a general and a specific perspective. "Transnational cinema in this sense points to the porosity of a national culture; classicism denotes the integrity of stylistic and industrial characteristics by which we can group these films together." (p.6) This is especially true of Japanese classical cinema, which borrowed from Hollywood in order to create its own movies that are then distributed as something completely new and exotic: "One way of thinking about classical Japanese is as a translation of the Hollywood idiom into the Japanese vernacular, which is then translated again, with subtitles, to the rest of the world." (p.3) This explains how

elements of familiarity help attenuate what is presented as a radically different cultural product. Through these multiple translations the spectator still experiences something familiar. Russell shows that translation is sometimes a way to create a feeling of otherness where there is, in fact, something utterly familiar. The word translation is also used in a broader sense, for example when Russell considers melodrama, a genre she argues to be quintessential to classical cinema. "In keeping with Sakai's theory of cultural translation, melodrama translates particular aesthetic and narrative struggles and contradictions into popular entertainment". (p.15) In Russell's book, the idea of translation is used to describe concretely the work of a bilingual scholar and to denote how movies can translate the struggles of everyday life.

The idea of studying the Japanese cinema as a classical cinema similar to Hollywood as well as the issues of translation and transnational understanding that are described above are outlined by Russell in the preface and the first chapter of her book. She then proceeds with a concrete analysis of specific Japanese movie directors based on the method she previously explained. The second, fourth and sixth chapters are based on reviews of Criterion DVDs that were previously published in the magazine *Cineaste*. For this reason, they differ slightly in tone with the first and the fifth chapter (respectively derived from a publication in the *China Review* and a book published in 2008 on Naruse). Comments on the Criterion releases, although interesting, can be superfluous for a reader in Japan since most of the DVDs are almost impossible to get here. Also, Russell tends to be much more critical of the work of Japanese directors in these chapters, especially of how they try to reconcile war memories with postwar Japan and how they portray women in their movies. For example, she opposes the usual reading of Mizoguchi as a feminist director by showing that his conception of feminism is more formal than political:

Many of his films imply serious rebukes to institutions of power that

keep women subjugated, and he is often referred to as a feminist director. However, his definition of *feministo*, or “special brand of Japanese feminism” is an aesthetic appreciation of women, rather champion of women’s rights. (p.53-54)

In the end, for Russell, women are still subjected to a man’s world view in Mizoguchi’s movies: “Sorrow is lined with guilt and self-abrogation, for it is a man’s world in which Mizoguchi’s women suffer.” (p.54) Even though the reasons vary greatly, Russell judges negatively the portrayal of women and their struggles in the work of Ozu, Kurosawa and the other directors she considers in her book (except for Naruse). For example, she seems to believe that Kurosawa could have done more in his portrayal of women in his movies: “Like many films of this period, it is an attempt to comply with the Occupation mandate to feature female protagonists, without endowing the female characters with any coherent subjectivity”. (p.90) This not only summarizes her conception of Kurosawa’s portrayal of women, but also her conception of how women were depicted in postwar Japanese movies. She is also very critical of how these directors handle war memories and of how their movies relay a certain ideology of postwar Japan. This does not mean she does not find redeeming qualities in these directors’ movies, especially Kurosawa’s. She seems to admire his capacity to create a hybrid cinema borrowing from the Japanese and Western tradition: “In fact, what makes his cinema so interesting is his ability to draw from a global cultural heritage that incorporates Japanese traditions as well as Western literature and Hollywood cinema.” (p.73-74).

The chapter on Naruse (ch. 5) seems to serve as a counterpoint to the other chapters in the book and, even though it is not the final chapter, it seems to be the culmination of Russell’s argument on Japanese classical cinema. A structural element is partly responsible for this. The chapter is based on an academic book on Naruse, not a review for a magazine. Russell seems to appreciate and know this director better, as well as the research that has been done on Naruse by other scholars. The arguments expressed in the first chapter for an analysis of Japanese cinema from the

1930's to the 1960's as a classical cinema can be used, in part, as a way to show the importance of Naruse to Japanese as well as to world cinema. From this point of view, Naruse should not be on the margins, but he should be considered as the one of the foremost directors of Japanese classical cinema.

Actually, although there has been a renewal of interest in Naruse in recent years, compared with the other directors discussed in the book, he is less known and less studied in the Western world and in Japan. Russell explains this situation, especially in the West, by the lack of exoticism in Naruse's movies and his tendency to borrow heavily from Hollywood's aesthetic. In this sense, he might be the most classical director discussed in the book. Russell shows that, even though his aesthetic is less distinct than the other directors, he still has a style of his own and a worldview that was singular in the context of postwar Japan. For Russell, one of the most important traits of Naruse's directorial style is that, contrary to the other filmmakers discussed in the book, he gives a more complex rendering of the struggle of Japanese women. They are not simply portrayed as hopeless victims in a male-dominated world:

One of the most familiar traits of Naruse's films is the downcast eyes of a woman, expressing sadness, resignation or disappointment. And yet, his women characters are usually surprisingly resilient, strong-willed survivors. Typical also are "life-goes-on" endings in which not everything is resolved but the conditions for life to continue are restored. (p.104)

Naruse also distinguishes himself by making movies that are not simply relaying the usual conception of what narratives, especially melodrama, should be in the context of postwar Japan. Russell supports this argument by quoting Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's PhD dissertation²:

² Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Logic of Sentiment: The Postwar Japanese Cinema and Questions of Modernity*, PhD Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1993.

For Yoshimoto, the film stands out for its refusal to follow through on the “conversion narrative” of postwar Japanese melodrama in which prewar Japan is “converted” seamlessly into the new postwar society, a conversion that depends on the denial of the war and its emergence from prewar modernity. (p.120)

Although Naruse’s aesthetic is not as distinctive as Ozu’s and his themes are not as exotic as Kurosawa’s or Mizoguchi’s, his portrayal of women and his worldview are very distinctive. He often challenged the views of his time while making movies that were considered popular when they were released. He worked with famous actresses and within the studio system, but he created something that other directors could not do in the same system. For these reasons and for the general quality of his movies, Naruse needs to be studied more and more distributed more in both the West and in Japan.

Russell’s book gives a new history of Japanese cinema by not only looking at stylistic elements and revisiting the context of production of these movies within a studio system but also through her analysis of texts in Japanese and English. In that sense, she is one of the bilingual scholars she talks about in her introduction—for this book not only reconsiders the canon of Japanese cinema established through mutual exchanges between Japan and the West, it also emphasizes the importance of considering the idea of “translation” even when addressing a visual media like cinema. The texts in this book, because of a difference in origin, tend to have very different tones, which can be disconcerting at times for the reader. The first and fifth chapters are obviously the most well thought out of the book, but the other chapters also offer challenging new ways of looking at renowned Japanese directors. In the spirit of translation, it would have been interesting to have more translations of quotations from Japanese sources. Also, further explanations of some concepts related to Japanese cinema would have been appreciated. For example, the Japanese New Wave cinema of the 1960’s, often cited in

opposition to classical cinema, is barely defined. Especially for non-specialists, the term New Wave cinema is usually associated with the French New Wave, which has almost nothing to do with the work of their Japanese counterparts. Nevertheless, this book is essential to understand some of the most important Japanese filmmakers and is a good introduction to the films of Naruse.

Catherine Russell, *Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited*, Continuum, New York, 2011, 171 p.