

DIRECTORY OF WORLD CINEMA

JAPAN 3

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MITSUO YANAGIMACHI

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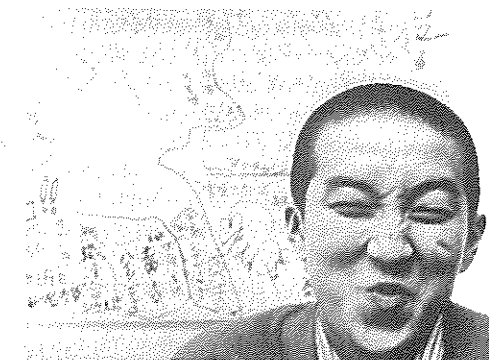
Currents of Dissent and Modes of Social Critique

Mitsuo Yanagimachi is one of the lesser-known independent film-makers to come to prominence at the end of the *Nuberu bagu* (Japanese New Wave). Beginning with a self-produced black-and-white 16mm documentary focusing on a rebellious youth biker gang in 1976, Yanagimachi moved towards increasingly ambitious projects over the course of his career, including his best-known film, *Himatsuri* (1985), the culmination of this period of work being an ill-received multi-national co-production – *Shadow of China* (1990) – followed by a decade-long hiatus. This break in production was suspended in the mid-2000s with a return to the director's initial themes of existential disparities in Japan's youth culture and release through an ecstatic physical/artistic exercise, in his deceptively simple *seishun eiga* (youth film) *Kamyu nante shiranai/Who's Camus Anyway* (2005) featuring a number of popular young stars. Yanagimachi's unique path – from cinéma-vérité to big-budget political thriller and most recently small-scale meta-film – offers a significant case study in the development from Japan's politicized post-war period to the present moment.

Like other film-makers who began their careers in documentary – Kazuo Hara, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Susumu Hani – Yanagimachi maintained a fair distance from Japan's established studio system, and, apart from a few brief encounters, has maintained that independence throughout his later career. This was unlike the beginnings of many of the film-makers associated with the early *Nuberu bagu*, who commonly received their training as studio-employed assistant directors. Shohei Imamura, Nagisa Oshima and Seijun Suzuki all began their careers under some of the most famous, firmly established artists of the previous generation, many of whom had begun their careers in the silent era. These film-makers left their positions under the nation's heralded masters, rebelling against the establishment they represented. For Yanagimachi, cinematic patriarchies held far less personal significance, naturally altering his work's form and content.

Born on 2 November 1945 in Ibaraki Prefecture, Yanagimachi attended Waseda University and studied law. It was not until 1970 that he became a freelance assistant director and received guidance from Atsushi Yamatoya at Toei. In 1974, he started the independent production company Production Gunro, or 'Wolf Productions', to begin his own projects. The first film would be *Goddo supiiido yuu! Burakku emparaa/Godspeed You! Black Emperor* (1976), a documentary focusing on members of 'youth motorcycle gangs', or *bosozoku*.¹ Shot between the autumn of 1974 and the summer of 1975, the film follows the story of one of Tokyo's infamous *bosozoku*, the Black Emperors. The gang had been in operation for approximately eight years by the time of the film's production, at which point the group's numbers were dwindling and its members splitting into two factions. The leaders struggle to hold their crew together and weed out the loyal from those just there for the ride. Without employing the use of narration, the film dissects the myth of these young men's anarchic behaviour through observations of their daily life and interviews with members and their families, viscerally communicating their first-hand experience through stunning footage of raucous night-time motorcycle runs.

Bosozoku roughly translates as 'running tribe', and the gangs follow the *kaminarizoku*, or 'thunder tribes', rumoured to have originated as ex-kamikaze pilots who missed the opportunity



Godspeed You! Black Emperor
© 1976 Gunro, Production Genro,
Toei Company

to die for the emperor and instead satisfy a desire for this thrilling, cathartic experience by riding together in formation. But wrapped around this nationalistic image is the figure of the 1950s American biker, which has had great influence on other Japanese subcultures, such as Rockabilly clubs and the cosplay scene. The Emperors adorn themselves with swastikas, *hinomaru* (the 'rising sun' emblem of the Japanese flag) and imperial chrysanthemums, but as outlined by Ikuya Sato, the use of such imagery was mostly for its shock value, their reasons for using it entirely different from those of the *uyoku* (right-wing groups who also ride the streets making noise, though in the daytime in black vans decked out with political slogans and speakers blasting propaganda) (Sato 1991). The term *bosozoku* itself was created by the media in June of 1972, by a local Nagoya television station when it reported a gang fight involving bikers in front of a Toyama train station. They wore a variety of costumes, but the most popular were *tokkofuku*, the uniform of kamikaze troops. Although the original kamikaze wore overalls, the *bosozoku* wore their own renditions of the battle uniform, integrating long overcoats and matching trousers, retro pilot boots and work clothes, with some added influence from US Navy uniforms. This cross-bred anarchic image allowed the gangs to become what Sato calls 'folk devils', targets for the media as symbols of dangerous youth angst (Morris 2007).

Yanagimachi's film undoes this complex image instead of glorifying anarchic rebellion. Remaining behind the camera, his presence is always felt through the very performative air of his subjects' presence on screen. While hardly aligning the film's politics with the biker youths, he encourages viewer identification with the group through the soundtrack's rock music and shooting from the moving vehicles; however, the project of the film is subtly deconstructing their tough exteriors. Critic Donald Richie writes that Yanagimachi creates stories where the balance between society and the individual has been disturbed, where 'Everything is shown but nothing is explained' (Manavendra 1990). In reaction to the hazing rituals performed by the senior members, one of the youngest Emperors, Izumi, comments in an interview, 'It wasn't punishment. It was as if I were their enemy', and later, 'You don't have to respect your seniors if they're bad', at which point the film immediately cuts to a typical Tokyo vérité street scene, showing middle-aged passers-by, subtly suggesting a lack of mutual understanding between generations.

After two more strictly independent narrative features – *Jukyusai no chizu/The Nineteen Year-Old's Map* in 1979 and *Saraba itoshiki daichi/Farewell to the Land* in 1982 – Yanagimachi financed his next film, *Himatsuri* (1985), through assistance from the Seibu chain of department stores, which had been seeking to expand their interests into the arts (Sharp 2002). Co-written by novelist Kenji Nakagami, this story of a Kumano woodcutter communing with the deity of nature and eventually turning to violence gave Yanagimachi

his first US release and subsequent international acclaim. Firmly establishing his themes of violence, resistance to modernization, nuanced critiques of nationalism, and groundbreaking homoeroticism, *Himatsuri* premiered at the 23rd New York Film Festival and was awarded the Silver Leopard at Locarno.

He later took on the thriller *Shadow of China* (1990), based on Masaaki Nishiki's novel *Snakehead*. *Shadow* rides on the success of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) and also stars actor John Lone. It concentrates on the torn identity of post-World War II Asia, illustrated in Lone's mysterious character, who worked as a 'snakehead' during the Cultural Revolution, leading people to escape from China. In Hong Kong he becomes a wealthy international businessman courted by Triad society, until rumours of his Japanese lineage and relation to a brutal Imperial war criminal spread through the city upon the eve of the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China on 1 July 1997. The film hovers over contemporaneous questions of Hong Kong's future as a post-national community, and those themes are strangely mirrored by the awkward character of the film, created as it was with discordant Japanese, American, British and Hong Kong production support and creative talents.

He continued to explore issues of Chinese identity in 1992 with *Ai ni tsuite, Tōkyō/About Love, Tokyo*, the story of a mainland Chinese man who becomes embroiled in the Tokyo criminal underworld. In 1995 he made his third Chinese-topic film, entitled *Tabisuru pao-jiang-hu/Wandering Peddlers*, a colour documentary about a nomadic family in Taiwan who carry on the dying tradition of selling medicine through circus tricks.

Doug Cummings praises Yanagimachi for his 'renowned tendency to describe rather than ascribe', which 'keeps the film's enigmas and nuances alive, waiting to be plundered'. He quotes the director as saying of his next film: 'The movie is a portrayal of reality' and 'I had no intention to protest or praise' (Cummings 2006). Cummings' and Yanagimachi's words touch on a key aspect of his work touched upon above, a mode of performative reality. The circus acts of the Taiwanese peddlers and the long-take landscape shots in *Himatsuri* set to Toru Takemitsu's haunting score come together here. Ikuya Sato describes the desires of the *bosozoku* in terms of the street being a 'stage', the route being a 'script' and their *tokkofuku* uniforms being their 'costumes'. He emphasizes the importance of play in the bikers' theatrics, as they attempt to embody the 'Saturday night hero' (Morris 2007). Yanagimachi's performative inclinations mesh well with those of the *bosozoku*, and his unique auteurial aesthetic may be glimpsed here in its early formation. Within short interludes set to rock music, there are moments in *Godspeed You! Black Emperor* that appear to have come about by Yanagimachi saying, 'Here, do this in front of my camera', or, 'Wait, don't stop until I can film that', as subject and cameraperson perform together.

The film Yanagimachi referred to as a portrayal of reality is 2005's *Kamyu nante shiranai/Who's Camus Anyway?*, also known as *The Bored Murderer*, the title of the film within the film. Having steeped himself in international film production and content, he returned to Waseda University, his home institution, to teach film for three years: 'that's when I got the idea. I thought it would be interesting to make a film together with students' (Schilling 2006). Rather than film on the Waseda campus in Tokyo's Nishi-Waseda district of Shinjuku ward, Yanagimachi and his crew created *Camus* at Rikkyo University's (Saint Paul's University) Ikebukuro campus, Toshima ward.

The film follows a class of students themselves endeavouring to make a film based upon the real-life story of a student who killed an old woman in the country, for no apparent reason. Tempting readings towards autobiography, Professor Nakajo (Hiroto Honda), the students' teacher, is a professional film director in retirement, and assigns Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942) as a reference for their project, hence the title. In an interview with critic Mark Schilling, Yanagimachi addresses his resemblance to Nakajo:

I took a bit of a chance with that one. When I was drawing the character diagram, I included one old guy. At first I wasn't going to make him like Nakajo, but then I thought I could use a film director in the story. I didn't want to make him anything like me, though. (Schilling 2006)

It is hard to ignore the significance of their similarities, and even more difficult not to take Nakajo's words as those of Yanagimachi. Professor Nakajo and another teacher walk through the campus, relating kabuki to cinema: 'Stylized beauty can never be separated from the storyline. That's the strength of kabuki. Amazing that it holds our interest even after 400 years of tradition.' To which Nakajo replies, 'Thanks to following tradition, and no new stories being written.' 'Will film ever make such a recovery? Kabuki has had to deal with many crises. It's not only film that has to deal with ups and downs.' 'Technological advances led to the invention of cinema. This helped it to flourish, but also contributed to its decay.' 'Are you blaming Hollywood for the decline?' 'Not in the least. But some are under that delusion.' 'Kabuki thrives in the computer age, while film faces extinction. Ah, cruel history!' Students carry a mural across the frame, and when it moves out of the frame, Nakajo and his friend are nowhere to be seen. Only the sound of the old professor's words are heard clearly: 'It's film's fragility that makes it so dear.'

Joel Neville Anderson

Special thanks to Soyoung Yoon.

Note

1. *Black Emperor* is likely to be most recognized in the United States and much of western culture as the inspiration for the titular avant-garde rock band Godspeed You! Black Emperor, based in Montreal, Quebec. The band's work does have some interesting parallels with Yanagimachi's film, such as long interviews (their tracks are often upwards of ten minutes or so) with disillusioned ex-radicals set to droning electric guitar.

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