Volume 11

DIRECTORY OF WORLD CINEMA
JAPAN 2

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The Blood of Rebirth

Yomigaeri no chi

Synopsis

Oguri is a masseur, renowned throughout the land for his hands' soothing powers. Offered an exclusive contract by a warlord driven mad by venereal disease, Oguri turns him down, preferring to be his own man. In attempting to leave the warlord's camp, Oguri is drugged and struck down, but not before encouraging Terute – the warlord's only pure concubine – who is trying to escape herself. Having casually bargained with a watermelon-seed-spitting God at a fork in the road between Heaven and Hell, Oguri returns to the land of the living as a Hungry Ghost, bent on reuniting with Terute and now pursued by the increasingly-insane warlord.

Critique

Shot in just ten days, Toshiaki Toyoda's comeback film after an unintended hiatus following Hanging Garden (Kuchû teien, 2005) is itself a rebirth for the rebellious director, but one which delivers on a number of thematic and stylistic precursors locatable in his oeuvre, distilling an already unique cinematic identity into something unapologetically of one piece. As freely adapted from a popular Japanese folk tale, The Blood of Rebirth is clearly a jidai-geki and ostensibly set in the Middle Ages, but the performers speak in modern dialects, and the wilderness setting could just as well be rationalized as a post-apocalyptic landscape of the not-so-distant future. One realizes that the device of pre-modernity

Zachariah Rush
The Blood of Rebirth, Phantom Film/TOYO Productions.

Editor: Masaki Murakami
Duration: 83 minutes
Cast: Tatsuya Nakamura, Mayuu Kusakari, Kiyohiko Shibukawa, Hirofumi Arai
Year: 2009

has been employed not to exploit cinematic reference points (no samurai swashbuckling here), but to create an open performative space in which players stand in as protagonist and antagonist.

Given the film's limited shooting time, it is not surprising that the experience so closely approximates that of a finely-orchestrated jam session. Speaking somewhat abstractly, it is worth noting that Toyoda trained to be a professional chess master until his mid-teens and also writes stage plays, which may go some way toward an explanation for an overall directorial style that is strongest in its skilful balancing of disparate elements into a cohesive cinematic harmony. In each practice, one picks pieces, imbues them with individual missions and puts them in play-within-a-set scheme acquiescent to variables of chance (an opponent's decisions, theatrical casting), not unlike the manner of creation apparent in Toyoda's films. Of course the primary reference point for The Blood of Rebirth's extra-cinematic narratology would have to be the improvisational rock music of Twin Tails, a musical group, of which Toyoda is reportedly a member, contributing cinematic effects to
live productions. The band provides The Blood of Rebirth with its score – created in a manner similar to that of Neil Young’s live jam session soundscape for Jim Jarmusch’s Dead Man (1995), a film which could be this piece’s spiritual brother – with the film’s star (Tatsuya Nakamura) on drums. Immediate connections between the physical performance of drummer and masseur seem the primary justification for Nakamura’s casting.

Like Toyoda’s other works, music remains an integral component of the director’s cinematic riffing, as indissoluble from the final audio-visual product as the image itself. Far from subscribing to a music video aesthetic, the two elements remain distinct waves throughout, their rhythms and emotions coalescing in glorious instances only to reverse in counterpoint. Toyoda is a profane purist of the best sort, having internalized magical qualities of commercial cinema to re-appy their patterns in punk fashion. One thinks of the slow motion opening credits sequence of Blue Spring (Aoharu, 2001) which was devoid of superimposed credits but for an inventive introduction of the film’s title, with the misbehaving teens walking along the school roof in slow motion to the music of Thie Michelle Gun Elephant, the actors treated to close ups that could only be called ‘star shots’ in which they expose the basic emotions of their characters. The Blood of Rebirth goes beyond that, taking a simple visual exercise such as Tenue pulling Oguni’s half-resurrected body along a forest floor, setting it to music and allowing the sequence to expand into meditative, psychedelic abstraction (the canted horizontal tracking shot of passing flora that composes a large part of this scene may appear familiar, as it is one of the director’s trademark compositions).

Without a ripe contemporary social body to navigate, this hardly seems like a Toyoda film at all. While some will say it is the extended slow-motion scenes running the length of a reel of film that will put off viewers (including fans of Toyoda’s earlier films), it is this contextual vacuum in which the thinly-defined characters are hung on casually-costumed actors and easily reduced to symbols that really smacks of something new, and needs getting used to. The contradictory existential search for freedom and belonging found in all Toyoda’s films is here laid bare, an earnest gesture put in question by the likewise starkness of the film’s manner of production. Both qualities suggest a bright future for Toyoda’s new life in film.

Joel Neville Anderson
Blue Spring

Aoi haru

Synopsis

Looking back on broken dreams of youth and forward to who knows what, the campus of a suburban boys’ high school becomes an obscene gangland playground for Seniors Kujo and Aoki. Kujo has asserted himself through the test of courage and insanity consented by his peers, standing on the roof of the school clapping as many times as possible without falling off. Best friends since childhood, the pair find their claim to running the school challenged by noisy underclassmen.

Critique

Adapted from Taiyo Matsumoto’s 1993 manga of the same name, Toshiaki Toyoda’s Blue Spring unites disparate elements of the original narratives, crafting a collision of the two artists’, recurrent themes. Expanding upon four of the book’s seven sketches, Toyoda focuses on the dissolving childhood bonds and subsequent teenage rivalry between Kujo and Aoki, working other characters from other strands into the anomic high school milieu in service of the film’s overarching theme, that of lost youth and delayed maturity during adolescence: a blue spring. Matsumoto’s unique visual style communicates rapid cinematic movement across frames and renders its subject through reductive lines framed by the realism of simulated camera lens perspectives. Toyoda wisely adopts a staid manner of composition and montage, allowing his uniquely-appealing visual storytelling within the frame to take full form.

Featuring iconic imagery of the seishun eiga genre — including baseball fanatics, drone operators and loads of gakuran (middle and high school uniforms for boys) — Blue Spring favours wide and medium compositions allowing ample space for physical comedy, often of an awkward, violent nature. The pleasures of watching this film stem from its anarchic symmetry of wonderfully-idiosyncratic performances accentuated by cleverly-directed physical cues. Not to be overlooked in assessing its visual dynamics, the film’s ensemble cast boasts some of the first performances of a number of today’s leading young actors in Japanese cinema (Ryuhei Matsuda, Eita) as well as the usual suspects from Toyoda’s dependable, never-predictable crew of character actors, notably Kiyohiko Shibukawa, Onimaru and comedian/magician/actor Mame Yamada as Professor Hamada, a wise teacher who keeps a garden on the grounds and represents the film’s only positive figure of authority, who, not for nothing, takes the diminutive form of a child (Yamada is approximately one metre in height).

Shot by veteran cinematographer Norimichi Kasamatsu, the look of Blue Spring reflects the claustrophobic perspectives of its characters; drained colours, graffiti-scarred walls, its bleak scenery literally confined to the dysfunctional school grounds. Matsumoto’s manga was published in the early 1990s, following the collapse of Japan’s asset price bubble that started the period referred to as the Lost Decade (now extended to the Lost Decades, or Lost
Years in consideration of current fears of global recession) in which prospects of job opportunities shrank and the tradition of lifetime employment withered. Toyoda’s film comes eight years after the original manga, but carries with it the initial shock of socio-economic fallout, expressing a coherent message regarding hierarchical systems supporting cycles of abuse and the ascension of the repressed to repressor. This implicit social critique is enriched by the universal theme of idyllic youth given way to painful adolescence, which represents a fairly defined genre in Japan’s film and literature under the name “seishun” (age of adolescence). The title of *Blue Spring* is actually one of a number of plays on words contained in the manga that is retained in the film, as the Japanese characters for ‘aori haru’ (blue spring) correspond to those for ‘seishun’. In Japan, the colour blue has traditionally represented spring as well as a sign of un-ripeness, qualities generally attributed to the colour green in Western aesthetics. The potent craftsmanship on display complicates toyoda’s reputation as a rock star auteur, revealing a rebellious optimism that he would continue to test in films to come. Towards the end, as Kuo and Professor Hamada stand by the flower bed in which he and Aoki planted seeds which have now grown into wilted flowers, Kujo asks, ‘Teacher, are there some flowers that never bloom?’ Hamada replies thoughtfully, ‘Flowers are meant to bloom...Not to dry up. That’s what I choose to believe. It’s a very important thing.’ As Kujo prepares to leave, Hamada crumples wilted flower petals into his fist, and with a flip of the wrist, withdraws a blooming flower, cracking a smile.

Joel Neville Anderson

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**Cromartie High – The Movie**

Sakigake!! Kuromati Kôkô: The Movie

**Studio/Distributor:**
Media Suites

**Director:**
Yudai Yamaguchi

**Producers:**
Shin Torisawa
Chikako Nakabayashi

**Screenwriters:**
Itsuigito
Shoichiro Masumoto

**Synopsis**

Normal high-school student Takashi Kamiyama enrolls at Cromartie High – the toughest school in Japan – to motivate his best friend Yamamoto to apply and succeed. Unfortunately Yamamoto fails to gain entrance, so the very normal Takashi finds himself a student at a school that has a long history of gang-related activities, has been destroyed six times, and has such a bad reputation that it even accepts a gorilla, a robot, and a Freddie Mercury-lookalike as students. Soon, the very normal Takashi, who secretly aspires to be a comedian, finds himself leading a group of misfits. Hayashida is his closest friend and sports a Mohawk. Maeda has been fighting his whole life, but is disrespected because he lacks a nickname. Hokuto is the son of conglomerate chairman who wishes to rule Cromartie, and eventually the world. If dealing with opposing class leaders and gangs from other schools is not enough, an impending alien attack looms over Cromartie High, so Takashi and his crew form the Self Defence Force and preparing to do battle.
Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence
Senjo no Meri Kurismasun

Studio/Distributor:
Oshima Productions
Recorded Picture Company

Director:
Nagisa Oshima

Producer:
Jeremy Thomas

Screenwriters:
Paul Mayersberg
Nagisa Oshima

Cinematographer:
Toichiro Narushima

Art Director:
Andrew Sanders

1997) and Beautiful Sunday (1998) that feature adults realizing, in song and fantasy, how much their lives have not lived up to their dreams, Nakashima refuses to condemn his often childlike dreamers, but sweetly views their lamentable inadequacies as their lives inevitably flow by like the river that dominates the end of the film. The melancholic call for fantasy has often been Nakashima’s primary concern, one continued in Paco and the Magic Book (Pako to mahō no ehon, 2008), and thus makes his more famous and thrilling Kamikaze Girls (Shimotsuma monogatari, 2004) somewhat of an exception in his oeuvre.

Memories of Matsuko is like Citizen Kane (1941) in that it recalls a life through the people who knew the deceased, but it is not an exercise in unknowability. Matsuko’s voice dominates, but it is soon clear it needs not be a reliable witness; her words seem to transcend realistic space and time, mixing past and present, dream and reality, to sing of the fantastic life she loved and lost, even if it is for a father who is already dead, or an audience in another world. Therein lies the value of cinematic entertainment to Nakashima, one found not in the mass-consumed fantasies themselves, but in the performance of the actual and fallibly-human need for hope and love.

Aaron Gerow

Synopsis
On the Japanese occupied Indonesian island of Java in 1942, the introduction of a bold English officer offsets the tedious stability of a POW camp, thereby threatening the foundations of its Imperial officials’ concept of bravery and cowardice. Heading the camp, the blue-blooded Captain Yanoi lives according to the bushido ideal (‘way of the warrior’, emphasizing loyalty and self-sacrifice), and governs with according severity. Rushing off to participate in a military trial after discovering the apparent rape of a Dutch prisoner by one of his Korean guards, Yanoi first meets Major ‘Strafer’ Jack Celliers, about to be served a death sentence after one last interrogation. The Japanese Captain is immediately attracted to this other, perfect soldier, persuading his superiors to release him to his camp. Reuniting with his old friend Colonel Lawrence back at camp, Celliers defies Yanoi’s subjection with a resilience that cuts each man’s wartime convictions.

Critique
The exuberant media personas of two pop stars (David Bowie, Ryuichi Sakamoto) and one comedian (Takeshi Kitano) coupled with Nagisa Oshima’s shape-shifting dedication to political art cinema set this Japan/England/New Zealand co-production beyond the borders of World War II accountability studies towards the territory of stylized psychosexual meditation. Along with straight man Tom
Composer: Ryuichi Sakamoto
Editor: Tomoyo Oshima
Duration: 123 minutes
Cast: David Bowie
        Tom Conti
        Ryuichi Sakamoto
        Takeshi Kitano
Year: 1983

Conti as the titular Mr Lawrence and convincingly-wounded cast of supporting actors, Oshima’s adaptation of the novel by Laurens Van der Post occupies an undefined erotic space beyond peace and between language and cultural understanding and succeeds largely in spite of itself.

By way of an offhand comment shared with Colonel Lawrence, it seems that Yano’s removal from the war at his current post has come through an embarrassing connection to the February 26th Incident, a historic 1936 uprising within the Japanese military. Abandoning a successful career in law, Celliers has thrust himself into combat, in part to escape the guilt of having failed to protect his younger, disabled brother from crushing social pressures and bullying; this is learnt from a lengthy flashback rendering the English countryside in surreal dreamlike fashion. Considering these details, we see that both these wounded men have a stake in the war outside their own patriotism and sense of adventure, a drive to self-actualize their ideal warrior. Yano wears his Imperial uniform with all the rigidity that could be expected of him, as well as practising swordfighting with his subordinates on the camp
grounds wearing traditional warrior garb. Celliers, however, stands as an embodiment of the cocky Western soldier, imbued with all requisite Christ-like imagery. Stood before a firing squad, his arms are suspended in air by chains as if on a cross, looking bravely on. It is this selflessness that attracts Yano (perhaps along with the wily femininity Bowie effuses) as soon as he first hears how Celliers had given himself up for capture upon threats by the Imperial army that they would murder local villagers instead of him. This appeal is cemented when he reveals wounds he had acquired through brutal questioning after capture, reminiscent of the fresh gashes inflicted on the back of the supposed Korean ‘rapist’ just one scene earlier.

Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence marked Ryuichi Sakamoto’s first acting role and full film score, and although he is said to look back on this performance in awe of his poor acting, it is hard to imagine anyone involved in the project – save for Oshima himself – who contributes more to its final character. As in Bernardo Bertolucci’s The Last Emperor (1987), Sakamoto is cast in a role committing despicable acts (in the later film, he plays Masahiko Amakasu, the head of the propagandist Manchukuo Film Association), while contributing a cool, empathetic soundtrack. This contradiction rather suits Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence, as does the irony in Bowie’s announcement that he wishes he could sing, which is a reference to Cellier’s young brother’s penchant for song within the context of the story, but also a wink to the audience.

Lawrence, who speaks fluent Japanese (recited phonetically by Tom Conti, convincingly), has developed something of a friendship with Sergeant Hara, and the two men often talk about the difference between their two peoples – their exchanges, in fact, begin and end the film, after the roles of captive and captor have been reversed. Given this structural fact, and that it is Hara who utters the title of the film, the significance of this relationship cannot be underestimated in reference to the ostensible intentions of the film. This tense camaraderie – which can be cut short at any moment by one of Hara’s violent outbursts – revolves around discussions of how, for a Japanese soldier, being taken prisoner is worse than death, but an Englishman would rather fight under chains than take his own life. As such, they appear to be examples of simple plot elucidation, intended to prepare viewers for otherworldly confrontations between Celliers and Yano, as lit in electric pastel blue. The film’s inconsistent camera work, clunky violence and the sometimes uneven dialects of the actors are residual characteristics of an improper alignment of the numerous cultural prisms assisting in the production, but also add to its theme of human fallibility across cultural divides. In the short scenes that serve as the story’s coda, Lawrence sums up this fallibility by describing the English and Japanese powers-thats-be as, ‘men who think they’re right’, thereby wrapping the film’s mystery up in a pat conclusion.

Joel Neville Anderson
The Munekata Sisters

Munekata kyodai

Synopsis

Two sisters, Setsuko and Mariko, live together in Tokyo. Setsuko, the eldest of the pair is married, supporting herself, her sister and her unemployed husband by operating a quaint bar. Mariko works at the bar as well, but spends most of her time with friends, doing what modern girls do: shopping, smoking, watching movies. Setsuko is clearly more traditional, spending her free time visiting her native Kyoto to see temples and drop in on her father convalescing from illness in the area. Setsuko’s husband mainly drinks, plays with the cats that have congregated in Setsuko and Mariko’s family home, and waits for work to come to him. This tedious tranquillity is broken by the reappearance of Tashiro, the object of Setsuko’s nearly-forgotten unrequited love, who had been swept away to France by the war. Mariko, in her own precocious way, pushes them together as matchmaker, while harbouring affection for the worldly art dealer herself.

Critique

It is interesting to find that the most commonly dismissed films of Yasujiro Ozu’s filmography are bookended by the director’s celebrated masterpieces within his formative post-war period. A Hen in the Wind (Kaze no naka no mendori, 1948), deemed overly melodramatic and forced, was followed by Late Spring (Banshun, 1949), and The Flavour of Green Tea Over Rice (Ochazuke no aji, 1952), often judged as overly simplistic, preceded Tokyo Story (Tōkyō monogatari, 1953). The Munekata Sisters, an adaptation of the the novel by Jiro Osaragi, sits between Late Spring (1949) and Early Summer (Bakushū, 1951). In approaching a piece that critical consensus regards as one of the master’s lesser works, it is important to note the uniformity of Ozu’s filmic style at this point in his career.

Bold or risky artistic decisions marking a departure from previous works are not necessarily selling points in this examination, an admittedly auteurist study of the director’s unique approach to cinema. One finds oneself in a situation not unlike that of a weekend grocery shopper thoughtfully comparing knotty root vegetables. There is differentiation in shape, size and quality as determined by conditions in which they were grown, but they are all essentially trying to become the same vegetable. As Ozu once suggested, his way of film-making is comparable to that of a tofu-maker, never aspiring to other’s complex cutlets and meat dishes. That holds true in viewing his films as commercial products, which they certainly were and are, but in looking at them critically, they are far more different than blocks of coagulated soymilk.

Which other Ozu films feature a bad-tempered alcoholic husband who stalks through a cat-filled house wearing an eye patch? Where else in Ozu’s world can you find a fed-up modern girl wielding an axe to defend her slighted sister, smashing bottles and glasses against a bar wall decorated with an inexplicable Don Quixote quote? Adapted from Jiro Osaragi’s serialized novel of the same name by Ozu and his longtime writing partner Kogo Noda,
you can feel the film’s script hitting the different instalments’ plot points at a turtle’s speed. Yet the script still moves faster than the usual Ozu picture, and the editing keeps up the pace (Toshio Goto worked for Ozu for the first and only time here, later advancing from assistant director to director). Subtle cues toward key events of the familial life cycle are portrayed here in similar fashion to those in Ozu’s other works, such as the foreshadowing of a parent’s death in the first scene of Tokyo Story; of course in The Munekata Sisters it is literally spelled out as a medical death sentence. Accustomed to faint-but-distinct whiffs of narrative smoke guiding the plot in Ozu’s world, one does not expect this bomb to be set off at the start. One of the few projects directed by invitation outside his home studio of Shochiku, the film featured a crew and cast largely new to the now veteran (literally, after the war) director. A big budget production by Shintoho, a studio created by a group of stars who left Toho during a strike, The Munekata Sisters feels like a familial acting company getting together to put on a gloomy play, which in rehearsal has turned into a good-natured farce.

The mood of the film floats one foot above the floor as empowered by the bubbly star persona of Hideo Takamine, embodying the character of Mariko. Characters erected to be hated by the reader/audience are here softened by skilled, playful direction, as with the loafing alcoholic husband, who plays with stray kittens as he spurns his wife’s selfless behaviour. Ozu has expressed a certain taste for mediocre actors, ones with a little talent that could be cultivated over time, and for whom he crafted characters that could carry their given qualities within a (very) structured narrative. In The Munekata Sisters, you can nearly see that process turned back on itself, where a complex narrative is flattened and the characters’ static states are enhanced. Although both inhibited and liberated by the strength of its two female leads, which in combination provide too strong a literary comparison for Ozu’s elegiac ferrotypes, the film offers a wholesome, coherent message regarding tension between modern life and traditionalism, most succinctly communicated, as is often the case in most any given Ozu story, by Chishu Ryu’s father character: ‘Being fashion conscious is boring. Think deep and choose your own road.’

Joel Neville Anderson

Nobody Knows
Dare mo shiranai

Studio/Distributor:
Bandai Visual Company
Cine Qua Non Films
TV Man Union

Synopsis

Akira and his mother Keiko arrive to take residence in a new apartment. Despite assuring the landlord they are the sole inhabitants, Akira’s young siblings Shigeru and Yuki are revealed to have been hiding in the pair’s suitcases. Sister Kyoko also comes out from hiding to join the family. Whilst much of the family background remains obscure, it is evident each of these children have been conceived from a different father and none have ever attended school. Presumably their births have also never been registered.