

Japan Society Announces Full Lineup for Online Edition of the 14th Annual JAPAN CUTS: Festival of New Japanese Film



North America’s largest festival of contemporary Japanese cinema presents a robust slate of 42 films streaming online throughout the U.S., introduces inaugural Next Generation competitive festival section with Obayashi Prize, and offers dual CUT ABOVE Awards to actors Koichi Sato and Ken Watanabe

New York, NY (June 24, 2020) – Japan Society announces the full lineup for the 14th annual **JAPAN CUTS: Festival of New Japanese Film**, the largest festival of its kind in North America, set for **July 17-30** as an entirely online experience. Continuing its annual mission to showcase the best and most exciting films coming out of Japan today, the summer festival will expand its reach beyond New York to introduce **30 features** and **12 short films** to audiences across the U.S.

As previously announced, festival organizers have partnered with Festival Scope and Shift72 to reformat JAPAN CUTS as a dynamic online streaming platform. Utilizing a VOD model, films will be made available to rent with a limited number of virtual tickets per title and access largely restricted to the U.S. The exclusive selection of film streaming options will be supplemented with live and pre-recorded virtual Q&As, discussion panels, and video introductions from filmmakers to maintain the festival’s sense of community and dedication to intercultural communication during the COVID-19 crisis, creating a meaningful online experience as we look forward to returning to physical cinemas together again in the future.

Festivities kick off on July 17 with a live virtual Q&A with **Shinichiro Ueda**, director of **Opening Film** selection ***Special Actors***—the much-anticipated follow-up to Ueda’s immensely popular breakout debut *One Cut of the Dead* (2017)—an ensemble comedy about an acting troupe that infiltrates a duplicitous cult. The festival’s **Centerpiece Presentation** is the online premiere of ***Fukushima 50***, a blockbuster drama that details the heroic actions of workers at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant who stayed behind to avert a catastrophe of global magnitude. The film’s two commanding leads, **Koichi Sato** and **Ken Watanabe**, are the dual recipients of this year’s CUT ABOVE Award, the festival’s annual award recognizing outstanding achievement in Japanese cinema.

“Like viewers in Japan and the U.S., our programming team has loved Koichi Sato and Ken Watanabe’s work for many years, which includes outstanding roles in both Japanese and international cinema,” says K. F. Watanabe, Deputy Director of Film at Japan Society, who organizes the festival with Japan Society Film Associate Amber Noé and Joel Neville Anderson, a JAPAN CUTS programmer since 2014. “We were pleased to see them reunite to commemorate the events of 3/11, and are happy to honor their dedication to telling hard truths and crossing borders during today’s moment of crisis. Though we cannot physically present these deserved awards to them in person, we are excited by their virtual participation and look forward to finding a future opportunity to welcome them to Japan Society.”

In addition, JAPAN CUTS 2020 celebrates the legacy of trailblazing filmmaker **Nobuhiko Obayashi**, who passed away in April this year at the age of 82. Despite being diagnosed with lung cancer in 2016 and given six months to live, Obayashi completed two critically lauded anti-war films including *Labyrinth of Cinema*, his final film and a highlight of this year’s **Feature Slate** lineup. Obayashi also appears in *Seijo Story - 60 Years of Making Films*, a touching documentary that chronicles the filmmaker’s long personal and professional partnership with his wife and producer Kyoko Obayashi. The couple’s daughter **Chigumi Obayashi** will join the festival as a participant in the virtual panel discussion **Nobuhiko Obayashi: A Conversation**, moderated by noted Japanese cinema scholar Aaron Gerow—one of three free panel discussions offered during the festival.

In keeping with JAPAN CUTS’ long-standing dedication to celebrating independent voices, this year’s edition introduces the **Obayashi Prize**—a competitive award given to an early career Japanese director whose independent narrative feature film is determined as the most accomplished by a jury of diverse industry professionals within the brand-new **Next Generation** section, the first competitive section in the festival’s history. The inaugural iteration of this section includes seven titles and will be juried by film director Momoko Ando (*0.5mm*), programmer Julian Ross of Locarno Film Festival and International Film Festival Rotterdam, and producer and Free Stone Productions CEO Miyuki Takamatsu (*Ten Years Japan*).

Japan Society’s Watanabe notes, “It feels deeply appropriate to introduce the Obayashi Prize as a way to acknowledge Nobuhiko Obayashi’s legacy and contribute to the sustainability of new and diverse filmmakers through the festival. We are deeply grateful for the Obayashi family’s support in setting up this exciting new festival tradition.” Responding to the establishment of the award, Chigumi Obayashi writes, “I am honored and cannot be more proud of the fact that my father’s path as a filmmaker can be handed down like this to filmmakers of a new future. [My mother] Kyoko-san, who produced and made films with my father the whole way, tearing up, said to tell you, ‘I’m very happy. Thank you very much.’”

Other festival highlights include the online premiere of Yoji Yamada’s *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, the 50th and final film in the historic film series starring the late **Kiyoshi Atsumi**, made on the half century anniversary of the first Tora-san film from 1969. Those seeking to expand their experience of the film are encouraged to watch newly restored Tora-san titles,

including the aforementioned first entry, in the festival's **Classics** section, which offers a selection of three titles especially important to the series. The festival also includes a wide range of documentary, avant-garde, hybrid, and short-form works within its **Documentary Focus**, **Experimental Spotlight**, and **Shorts Showcase** sections. Highlights include *Reiwa Uprising*, the latest from iconoclastic documentary filmmaker **Kazuo Hara** about the surprising emergence of a new political party in Japan; the mesmerizing *Cenote*, from Oshima Prize recipient **Kaori Oda**, which explores the physical and spiritual dimensions of sinkholes in Yucatán, Mexico; and imaginative short films such as *Wolf's Calling*, the latest from longtime JAPAN CUTS favorite **Toshiaki Toyoda**, a 17-minute abstract samurai film responding to the media frenzy involving his unwarranted arrest for gun possession last year; and *Wheel Music* from filmmaker **Nao Yoshigai**, following up her Cannes selection *Grand Bouquet*. The full dynamic festival lineup is available as individual VOD rental titles, discounted festival section bundles, and through an all-access festival pass.

JAPAN CUTS 2020 is organized by K. F. Watanabe, Amber Noé, and Joel Neville Anderson.

Virtual tickets go on sale Friday, July 10 at 10:00 am. Virtual ticket prices range from \$2–\$7 with discounted ticket bundle offers available. For complete information visit japancuts.japansociety.org.

Select filmmakers and talent available for virtual interviews; please reach out to Allison Rodman arodman@japansociety.org with all talent and screener requests. Full slate of films below.

JAPAN CUTS 2020 FULL LINEUP

*All films screen online at japancuts.japansociety.org
in Japanese with English subtitles unless otherwise noted.*

FEATURE SLATE

Films listed alphabetically by title.

Extro

Dir. Naoki Murahashi, 2019, 88 min.

On the lot of “Warp Station Edo,” a popular shooting location for historical *jidaigeki* (period dramas), a camera crew follows several extras as they prepare for and perform their non-speaking roles as anonymous townspeople behind sword-wielding stars. In particular, they focus on an ambitious sexagenarian who wants to follow in the footsteps of his idol Steve McQueen (specifically as a fireman in *The Towering Inferno*) and unintentionally causes the crew a lot of grief in the process. An exceedingly clever send-up of the Japanese film industry and a loving tribute to the work of extras, *Extro* is a cameo-filled mockumentary that derives its

title from none other than filmmaker Nobuhiko Obayashi, who appears as a talking head interviewee to say, “To me, extras are... Maestros.”

Fukushima 50

Dir. Setsuro Wakamatsu, 2020, 122 min.

When the magnitude 9.0 Great East Japan Earthquake struck off the coast of the Tohoku region in northeastern Japan at 2:46 PM on March 11, 2011, it caused a massive tsunami that soon reached the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In *Fukushima 50*, as waves penetrate the facilities, shift supervisor Toshio Izaki (Koichi Sato) assesses the overheating reactors while coordinating with plant manager Masao Yoshida (Ken Watanabe), who mediates with Tepco (Tokyo Electric Power Company) headquarters amidst micro-management and government inaction. Based on Ryusho Kadota’s book *On the Brink* and directed by Setsuro Wakamatsu in a thrilling interpretation of real-life events, “Fukushima 50” is the name media reports used to describe the workers who stayed behind to avert a catastrophe of global magnitude. Reunited since co-starring in *Unforgiven* (JC 2014), Sato and Watanabe provide heartfelt tribute to the people of Fukushima. **Centerpiece Presentation. Video greeting from Koichi Sato and Ken Watanabe, recipients of the 2020 CUT ABOVE Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Film, to be announced.**

It Feels So Good

Dir. Haruhiko Arai, 2019, 115 min.

When Naoko (Kumi Takiuchi) proposes a one-night stand to Kenji (Tasuku Emoto) while he’s back in their hometown of Akita to attend her imminent wedding to a Self-Defense Forces officer, the fervid passion of their youthful romance over a decade earlier cannot be contained. Underemployed in part due to the economic impact of 3/11, they ruminate on shared disaffection approaching middle age and keep extending their affair until her fiancé’s delayed return. Opening a time capsule together, they move from conceited nostalgia to self-awareness as they step into the future with humility just as the world appears on the verge of erupting. Adapted from Kazufumi Shiraishi’s novel and meditating on a painting by Miho Ninagawa, Haruhiko Arai’s film represents a remarkable achievement by Takiuchi (*Side Job*, JC 2018) and Emoto (*And Your Bird Can Sing*, JC 2019).

Labyrinth of Cinema

Dir. Nobuhiko Obayashi, 2019, 179 min.

The final film by Nobuhiko Obayashi finds the late director returning to the subject of Japan’s history of warfare following the completion of his “War Trilogy,” which ended with *Hanagatami* (JC 2018). On the last night of its existence, a small movie theater in Onomichi—the seaside town of Obayashi’s youth where he shot nearly a dozen films—screens an all-night marathon of Japanese war films. When lightning strikes the theater, three young men are transported into the world onscreen where they experience the violent battles of several wars leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima. A breathless cinematic journey through Japan’s past, *Labyrinth of Cinema* finds Obayashi using every trick in his book to create an awe-inspiring, visually

resplendent anti-war epic that urges us to consider cinema as a means to change history. The culmination of an exceptional 60-year career worth celebrating.

Mrs. Noisy

Dir. Chihiro Amano, 2019, 106 min.

Maki (Yukiko Shinohara)—a mother, wife, and once-successful novelist—moves into a new apartment outside of the city with her family hoping to restart her life and career. Desperate to write a new story, she is interrupted by the persistent sound of her neighbor (Yoko Ohtaka) beating her futon on the veranda at odd hours. As annoyance turns into all-out rage, the neighbors' fighting prompts a media frenzy when a sensational video goes viral on social media, simultaneously creating a new writing opportunity for Maki. An often humorous and multifaceted examination of social boundaries, prejudice, and the fickleness of fame, *Mrs. Noisy* explores the blurred lines between private and public perception when art imitates life.

My Sweet Grappa Remedies

Dir. Akiko Ohku, 2019, 108 min.

Yoshiko Kawashima (Yasuko Matsuyuki) records her thoughts in pithy diary entries musing on the essentials: bicycles and seasonal alcohol consumption in quiet contentment of 40-something single life working in a small publishing office. She regularly meets up with her friend and younger colleague Wakabayashi (a delightful supporting turn by Haru Kuroki), who introduces Kawashima to her college junior Okamoto (Hiroya Shimizu). Over a year and a half, from spring to summer, as the potential for romance grows, Kawashima reflects on memories and thoughts for the future. Based on the novel by Jiro (Sissonne), Akiko Ohku's masterful cinematic narration of her heroines' inner monologues is on full display, opening profound observations on modern life in this story of intimacy between two women at different times in their lives.

On-Gaku: Our Sound

Dir. Kenji Iwaisawa, 2020, 71 min.

In the lazy days of summer, a trio of bored high school delinquents decide to start a band without any skill or clear motivation apart from the encouragement of a girl classmate. When the stakes are raised and they get invited to perform at a local music festival, however, the group's leader (voiced by popular rock musician Shintaro Sakamoto) starts to get cold feet. Adapted from the manga by Hiroyuki Osashi, this impressive feature animation was completed over the course of seven years with over 40,000 hand-drawn frames handled almost entirely by director Kenji Iwaisawa himself. A musical slacker comedy in the tradition of Nobuhiro Yamashita's *Linda Linda Linda* (2005) with infectious deadpan humour and an idiosyncratic visual style, *On-Gaku: Our Sound* is a delightful celebration of music's inherent power.

Special Actors

Dir. Shinichiro Ueda, 2019, 109 min.

Following the unexpected and immense success of his breakout indie debut film *One Cut of the Dead* (2017), director Shinichiro Ueda delivers another inventive comedy with an ensemble cast

of mostly unknown workshop actors in a meta-narrative full of playful twists. Painfully shy and prone to stress-induced fainting spells, Kazuto (Kazuto Osawa) nevertheless has dreams of being an actor. After a chance run-in with his brother, he joins an unusual agency that hires out actors to play people in real life. Before long, a young woman comes to the actors with a desperate plea to help save her family's inn from the clutches of a pseudo-religious cult named Musubiru—requiring a high-stakes sting operation that involves acting their way into the shady organization's inner circle. But can Kazuto handle the pressure? ***Opening Film. Live Q&A with director Shinichiro Ueda scheduled for July 17 at 9 pm (ET).***

Tora-san, Wish You Were Here

Dir. Yoji Yamada, 2019, 115 min.

From 1969-97, director Yoji Yamada oversaw the production of 49 films starring comedian Kiyoshi Atsumi as Torajiro "Tora-san" Kuruma, an itinerant peddler from Shibamata in Tokyo with a brash no-nonsense attitude and infectious grin. Twenty-two years later, on the 50th anniversary of the first Tora-san film, Yamada presents the 50th and final entry in his beloved film series. Interspersing footage from the previous films (beautifully restored from 4K scans), *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here* continues the story by centering on Tora-san's nephew Mitsuo (Hidetaka Yoshioka)—now a middle-aged single father and successful novelist—and reintroducing Mitsuo's teen sweetheart Izumi (Kumiko Goto). A heartwarming and nostalgic film about family and the passage of time that is sure to produce new Tora-san fans and elate longtime devotees of the series.

Voices in the Wind

Dir. Nobuhiro Suwa, 2020, 139 min.

In the town of Otsuchi in the northeast coast of Japan, there is a white telephone booth to which over 30,000 people from all over the country have traveled in order to "speak to" the loved ones they lost to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake on a disconnected rotary phone. Taking inspiration from this "Wind Telephone" phenomenon, *Voices in the Wind* chronicles the journey of 17-year-old Haru (Serena Motola in a breakout role)—deeply grieving the loss of her brother and parents who were swept away in a tsunami on that tragic day—as she hitchhikes from her aunt's house in Hiroshima through Tokyo and Fukushima on her way back to her hometown of Otsuchi. A tender and quietly devastating roadtrip drama that finds Hiroshima-born director Nobuhiro Suwa returning to his home country to make a film for the first time in 18 years.

NEXT GENERATION

Films listed alphabetically by title.

Beyond the Night

Dir. Natsuki Nakagawa, 2019, 94 min.

Brooding outsider Mikiro (Kenta Yamagishi) catches Sotoko (Saki Tanaka) just as she reaches a breaking point in her claustrophobic rural life. Their encounter introduces an eroticism with a

violent edge that threatens to slash apart her toxic marriage with the abusive Atsuya (Yasuhiro Isobe) and his web of small town corruption. However Natsuki Nakagawa renders this pulpy premise in deadpan realism, revealing Sotoko (homophonous with *soto*, meaning both “beyond” and “outside”) as a powerful character who challenges femme fatale archetypes, living in the frustration of failing to understand, even until the very end, those who are held closest. Structured with repeated scenes in a moonlit forest, *Beyond the Night* pierces the uncanny surface of physical reality to access the turmoil of humans’ inner desires.

Kontora

Dir. Anshul Chauhan, 2019, 143 min.

Having already lost her mother, high schooler Sora (Wan Marui) is hit especially hard by the passing of her grandfather. Frustrated and lonely in the countryside with her distant father (Taichi Yamada), she is fascinated with the old man’s WWII diary featuring vivid sketches and stories of the horrors of war, as well as suggestions of treasure buried in the local forest. The appearance of a mysterious mute man perpetually walking backwards (Hidemasa Mase) brings simmering tensions to a boil. *Kontora* offers a haunting tale of how one era can speak to another as well as the pain of being lost in memories; an exceptionally accomplished second feature shot in just 10 days by Anshul Chauhan, featuring rich black-and-white cinematography by Max Golomidov and an evocative score by Yuma Koda.

Life: Untitled

Dir. Kana Yamada, 2019, 98 min.

Adapting her own stage play, Kana Yamada’s incisive and comic directorial debut is a multifaceted portrayal of women’s lives intersecting with a Tokyo escort service. The dynamic group is anchored by Kano (a breakout role for Sairi Ito of *The Naked Director*), who works in the rundown office where the women all wait for calls and becomes a witness to others between their visits to local love hotels, including the veteran Shiho (Reiko Kataoka of *Hush!*). Portraying an industry frequently exploited in Japanese media for objectifying scenes of titillation or abjection, Yamada shows sex workers’ dignity and desires amidst the misogyny and violence pervading society, updating the humanistic impulses of Kenji Mizoguchi to address the contemporary alienation of labor with humor and drama.

The Murders of Oiso

Dir. Takuya Misawa, 2019, 79 min.

Set in the titular seaside town of Oiso, Kanagawa, Takuya Misawa’s sophomore feature explores the tense bond between four friends Tomoki (Haya Nakazaki), Shun (Koji Moriya), Kazuya (Yusaku Mori), and Eita (Shugo Nagashima). Loafing through flexible employment as underlings in a corrupt construction company, the twenty-something mens’ callow jealousy and childish resentment spins out of control following the death of their boss, Kazuya’s uncle. This unflinching examination of small town corruption, toxic masculinity, and the fetid angst of wasted youth is an exceptionally well-crafted drama that reveals a keen eye for creative narrative construction and impressive control of film language.

My Identity

Dir. Sae Suzuki, 2019, 63 min., in Japanese and Chinese with English subtitles.

Bullied at school and beaten by her mother, Taiwanese-Japanese teenager Rei runs away from home and is spontaneously taken in by Aoi, an office worker stigmatized by petty gossip who fights off unwanted attention from a male colleague. After a traumatic event binds them even closer together, the pair flee Tokyo and hide away in an abandoned inn. Together, they create a utopian space of female camaraderie and solace—with occasional picnics and trips to the mesmerising Seitenkyu Palace—but before long are forced to face reality. Elegantly directed by newcomer Sae Suzuki, *My Identity* is a tender coming-of-age tale that captures the profound yearning of youth and power of acceptance.

Roar

Dir. Ryo Katayama, 2020, 99 min.

This impressive debut feature by Ryo Katayama sets two parallel stories in Fukui City on the west coast of Japan. In the wake of a horrendous crime committed by his older brother, Makoto (Ryo Anraku) runs away from home and follows around a mysterious, silent vagrant (played by Katayama) who gets hired to beat up men. At the same time, radio announcer Hiromi (Mie Ota) tries to ward off the increasingly aggressive attention of her boss, with whom she starts a half-hearted affair, while struggling to find genuine love and compassion. As the different kinds of violence in both Makoto and Hiromi's lives escalate, *Roar* builds to a boiling point that finds the two strangers confronting the violence within themselves and their individual desire for liberation.

Sacrifice

Dir. Taku Tsuboi, 2019, 76 min.

Seven years after predicting the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake while she was unwittingly involved in a doomsday cult called Sacred Tide, college student Midori (Michiko Gomi) continues to have visions through unusual powers of premonition. Meanwhile at the same school, the duplicitous Toko (Miki Handa), who desperately seeks to escape her mundane life, suspects her classmate Okita (Yuzu Aoki) of being the culprit behind a string of disturbing cat killings and the murder of a classmate. Evoking the natural and human-induced disasters of 3/11 and the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack of 1995, *Sacrifice*—confidently directed by Taku Tsuboi, who makes his feature film debut—ponders the cyclical nature of violence, trauma, and resentment as a highly original, brooding mystery and supernatural thriller that goes in delightfully unexpected directions.

CLASSICS

Films listed alphabetically by title.

Tora-san, Our Lovable Tramp (4K restoration)

Dir. Yoji Yamada, 1969, 91 min.

The first and perhaps most iconic entry in the long-running Tora-san film series directed by Yoji Yamada, newly restored from a 4K scan on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. After a 20-year absence, traveling salesman Torajiro “Tora-san” Kuruma (Kiyoshi Atsumi) returns to his hometown of Shibamata in the Shitamachi area of Tokyo—a group of neighborhoods distinguished by its no-nonsense working class—and the family-run *dango* (rice dumpling confection) shop run by his aunt and uncle. After reuniting with his younger sister Sakura (Chieko Baisho), Tora-san bumbles his way into her romantic life to ruin one marriage proposal and broker another with Hiroshi, a factory worker next door (Gin Maeda).

Tora-san Meets the Songstress Again (4K restoration)

Dir. Yoji Yamada, 1975, 92 min.

Also known as *Tora-san’s Rise and Fall* (among other titles), the 15th Tora-san film is a fan favorite and the second to feature Ruriko Asaoka as Tora-san’s love interest Lily Matsuoka—the most recurring “madonna” of the long-running series who makes five total appearances, including in *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*. Traveling through Hokkaido with a disgruntled salaryman seeking a lost love (Eiji Funakoshi), Tora-san runs into Lily, who has gotten divorced since they last saw each other in *Tora-san’s Forget Me Not* (1973) and is working as an itinerant singer. After a spat in the scenic town of Otaru, they split and meet again in Tora-san’s hometown of Shibamata, where they reconcile. With sparks reignited between the pair, will the perpetual bachelor Tora-san finally find a chance at love?

Tora-san, My Uncle (4K restoration)

Dir. Yoji Yamada, 1989, 108 min.

In the 42nd entry of the Tora-san film series, the attention shifts from Tora-san to his restless teen nephew Mitsuo (Hidetaka Yoshioka), who is heartsick over Izumi (Kumiko Goto), a former classmate who moves to Saga in Kyushu following her parents’ divorce. After failing to pass his college entrance exams, Mitsuo sneaks away from home to ride his motorcycle to Saga and see Izumi, running into his uncle Tora-san at an inn on the way. Together, uncle and nephew continue Mitsuo’s journey to Izumi’s home where Tora-san becomes smitten with Izumi’s aunt Hisako (Fumi Dan), who looks after her eccentric historian father. The first of five Tora-san films featuring Kumiko Goto, including her lead role in *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*.

DOCUMENTARY FOCUS

Films listed alphabetically by title.

Book-Paper-Scissors

Dir. Nanako Hirose, 2019, 94 min.

Nobuyoshi Kikuchi is a man contentedly out of step with the times. Forgoing modern technology, the 77-year-old master book designer (*soutei-ka*) has utilized the traditional tools of scissors, rulers, and pencils to design over 15,000 extraordinary book covers by hand throughout his decades-long career. With careful, philosophical consideration of every aspect of

the process, Kikuchi also chooses the paper and ink to best represent the essence of each book. Filmed over three years, this passion project from Hirokazu Kore-eda protege Nanako Hirose (whose late father was also a book designer) matches Kikuchi's contemplative and considerate approach to his craft, offering a thoroughly measured portrait of the pursuit of perfection and 94 minutes of ASMR for design enthusiasts and bibliophiles.

i -Documentary of the Journalist-

Dir. Tatsuya Mori, 2019, 113 min.

Reporter Isoko Mochizuki has become a press freedom folk hero for interrupting the stifling bargain between the government and elite press (*kisha*) clubs. Voicing persistent questions on controversial subjects during cabinet briefings, she challenges the boys club of journalism that places access above truth. Mochizuki is a perfect subject for adversarial documentarian Tatsuya Mori, long telling stories suppressed or misshapen by dominant media accounts. He follows as she pulls her rolling suitcase while speaking rapidfire into her cell phone, covering issues from environmental impacts of U.S. base construction in Henoko Bay, Okinawa and the Noriyuki Yamaguchi rape case to the Moritomo Gakuen scandal. The subject of the hit dramatic film *The Journalist* (JC 2019) starring Eun-kyung Shim and Tori Matsuzaka, this rousing documentary is just as moving and inspiring.

Prison Circle

Dir. Kaori Sakagami, 2020, 120 min.

This singular documentary—shot over two years after six years of negotiating for unprecedented permission to shoot inside a Japanese prison—follows the emotional and psychological journey of four young male inmates at Shimane Asahi Rehabilitation Center as they participate in Therapeutic Community, an unconventional group conversation-based rehabilitation program that encourages participants to talk through their experiences in order to better understand themselves and the consequences of their crimes. Initially skeptical, the inmates gradually open up and provide heartbreaking testimonies of childhoods filled with poverty, violence, and abandonment, which are visualized onscreen with sand animations. A continuation of director Kaori Sakagami's career-long interest in trauma and the process of recovery, *Prison Circle* provides compelling evidence for the dire need of empathy in the process of rehabilitation and a vision for the potential future of decarceration.

Reiwa Uprising

Dir. Kazuo Hara, 2019, 250 min.

Known for making "action documentaries" such as *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (1987) about iconoclastic individuals with producer Sachiko Kobayashi, Kazuo Hara follows *Sennan Asbestos Disaster* (JC 2018) with another epic project approaching groups of everyday people banding together to address injustice in contemporary Japan. Taking the newly instated calendar era name Reiwa ("beautiful harmony"), actor-turned-politician Taro Yamamoto (*Battle Royale*) formed the Reiwa Shinsengumi ("new squad") party just three months before the July 2019 Japanese House of Councillors election, offering an ambitious leftist platform and staging jubilant political demonstrations with music and horses. Hara follows the party's diverse slate of

candidates including transgender Tokyo University professor Ayumi Yasutomi and disabled politicians Yasuhiko Funago and Eiko Kimura as they interrupt rightwing status quo and widespread political apathy.

Seijo Story: 60 Years of Making Films

Dir. Isshin Inudo and Eiki Takahashi, 2019, 83 min.

Nobuhiko Obayashi and Kyoko Hanyu met in 1959 as students at Seijo University in Tokyo. Within a year, they made their first film together—the rest, as they say, is history. Charting their 60-year personal and professional partnership, this loving documentary portrait follows the Obayashis during post-production of their final film together, *Labyrinth of Cinema*, as they share stories spanning over half a century of Japanese cinema history. While it is an obvious must-see for fans of the *House* director, *Seijo Story* also illuminates the essential and occasionally uncredited contribution of Kyoko Obayashi as an above-and-beyond producer on all of her husband's films whose essential work behind the scenes ranged from raising money to managing staff and feeding the crew with her own cooking.

Sending Off

Dir. Ian Thomas Ash, 2019, 79 min.

Documentary filmmaker Ian Thomas Ash accompanies Dr. Kaoru Konta and a handful of nurses on palliative care house visits across rural Japan as they look after patients who are preparing for death from old age or illness. Taking a minimally-intrusive, observational approach, Ash records patients discussing with their family members, Dr. Konta, and the other nurses how they would like to spend their final days over the course of one year as seasons change and the lives of three patients pass on. Engaging with the process of dying in a very matter-of-fact and respectful manner, *Sending Off* is a deeply moving examination of the sensitive considerations surrounding death and the various rituals undertaken to say goodbye to loved ones.

What Can You Do About It?

Dir. Yoshifumi Tsubota, 2019, 119 min.

After getting diagnosed with ADHD at 41-years-old, filmmaker Yoshifumi Tsubota begins to visit with and record his father's 61-year-old cousin Makoto, who lives alone with a pervasive developmental disorder (also known as an autism spectrum disorder), over the course of several years. In the process of getting to know his semi-distant family member, in whom he finds a kindred spirit, Tsubota eventually turns the camera to himself to consider his own struggle with mental health. A touching, diary-like dual portrait of men finding unknown parts of themselves through each other, *What Can You Do About It?* (originally titled *Our Developmental Disorder*) takes its title from an oft-repeated Japanese phrase within the film that signifies the pair's shared commonsense attitude regarding their situations: "*Datte shoganai janai.*"

EXPERIMENTAL SPOTLIGHT

Films listed alphabetically by title.

Cenote

Dir. Kaori Oda, 2019, 75 min.

This captivating experimental documentary approaches natural sinkholes in Mexico as glimmering physical phenomena and natural forms rich with indigenous knowledge and history. “Cenotes” once constituted a vital source of water for Mayan people in Yucatán, sacred places where sacrificial offerings were made. Said to connect the living world and the afterlife, they act as portals to a distinct cosmology as well as sites of unique optical and aural phenomena. With a voiceover presenting Mayan poetry and research on the cenotes’ history amidst a bubbling soundscape, Oda combines Super-8mm and iPhone X footage, immersing the viewer in light and dark between beams of sunshine in otherworldly underwater and underground visions. Oda continues to push the documentary form in this film previously screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and FICUNAM Mexico.

Kinta & Ginji

Dir. Takuya Dairiki and Takashi Miura, 2019, 84 min.

Every couple of days, a boxy robot and a red-capped raccoon chatter and bicker as they wander through the woods, pausing now and then to take in the scenery. They are longtime friends, but don’t always get along. Still, they never seem to run out of things to talk about, whether banal observations or philosophical inquiries. Produced, directed, shot, scored, sound designed, edited, and performed in handmade costumes by real-life friends and creative partners Takuya Dairiki and Takashi Miura (in their 12th film together), *Kinta & Ginji* is a delightfully odd and whimsical lo-fi adventure through the Japanese countryside captured on miniDV that recalls the early films of Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss.

Shell and Joint

Dir. by Isamu Hirabayashi, 2019, 154 min.

Receptionists working in a minimalist capsule hotel discuss suicide and eroticism, puppetry-animated pests philosophize their taxonomy, women gorge themselves on seafood and white wine as they swap sex stories—these are just some of the striking scenes that make up celebrated short film director Isamu Hirabayashi’s remarkable debut feature. Unfurling in a series of interconnected vignettes framed within carefully composed widescreen static shots, *Shell and Joint* humorously examines life, sex, and death with surreal juxtapositions and absurd premises. Making multiple comparisons between human beings and arthropods, Hirabayashi seems to echo one central question throughout: is life just a scientific phenomenon or something else?

SHORTS SHOWCASE

Films listed by genre and alphabetically by title.

Narrative Shorts

Birdland

Dir. Takeshi Kogahara, 2019, 20 min.

After his caretaker leaves him for dark and lonely moments at home, elderly Koji remembers his late wife Saki and the time they spent watching snowfall together in a park. Beyond age and even death, the connection between the two is vivid and all-consuming. Takeshi Kogahara, director of *Nagisa* (JC 2018), reflects on navigating the end of life—a theme that is personally significant for the director whose own grandmother is bedridden and has difficulty communicating.

See You on the Other Side

Dir. Yoko Yamanaka, 2019, 24 min.

Consensual polyamorous relations between Hiroki, Natsuki, and Kanako are injected with palpable tension following their cohabitation, resulting in an unexpected turn of events. A showcase of up-and-coming acting talent (all born in 1996) captured using stunning visuals, same-aged Yamanaka's follow-up to *Amiko* (JC 2018) introduces audiences to the vague (*aimai*) world of surreal nuance and mysterious ambiguity. A perfect short to remember what summer feels like.

Wolf's Calling

Dir. Toshiaki Toyoda, 2019, 17 min.

After director Toshiaki Toyoda was arrested in April 2019 for unlawful possession of a handgun (which was actually a familial keepsake) and eventually released without charge, he responded with this 17-minute period drama based on his experience. A girl finds an old handgun in her attic and the symbolic object conjures a mystical scene of samurai (a stellar cast of actors joined by the 20-person Edo punk band Seppuku Pistols, who also provide the soundtrack) gathering within the moss-grown location of Kasosan Shrine in Tochigi Prefecture. Director's note: "Turn up the volume!"

Documentary Shorts

Bleached Bones Avenue

Dir. Akio Fujimoto, 2020, 16 min., in Zomi with English and Japanese subtitles.

Myanmar-based director Fujimoto returns after his documentary-like feature drama *Passage of Life* (JC 2018) with an affective, drama-like documentary. The local Zomi people of the Chin State in western Myanmar dig to recover the remnants of 30,000 Japanese soldiers who fell in the "Battle of Imphal" 75 years ago—a form of daily labor for the Zomi that is complicated by the fact that many Burmese people died in the battle fighting for the Japanese. In this Japanese-Myanmar co-production, Fujimoto trains the camera to unravel the multiple perspectives and consider the act of digging up bones as both a metaphysical and physical act of reconciliation.

Lost Three Make One Found

Dir. Atsushi Kuwayama, 2019, 26 min., in English and Portuguese with English subtitles.

A joyous, off-the-beaten-path road trip film from young Portuguese-fluent Japanese director, nicknamed “Sushi,” who is searching for the Sacred Fountain of Fornalha—a legendary spring in Southern Portugal said to heal heartbreak—in a campervan named “The Little Donkey.” Featuring many unique characters and gorgeous scenery along the way, the voyage itself seems to heal him, not the fountain. Dedicated to his late grandmother, who makes a brief appearance, and whom Kuwayama learned had passed away in Japan during his trip.

Nana

Dir. Fumiya Hayakawa, 2019, 8 min., in English and Spanish with English subtitles.

Rosario is a mother and sitter. She makes lunch for her working son and takes care of young Nima and Nancy, picking them up from school and spending time with them in the park. This sincere slice of life documentary short reveals the power of love and considers the importance of society’s caregivers.

The Sculpture of Place & Time

Dir. Tatsuhito Utagawa, 2019, 8 min., in Khmer with English subtitles.

Phnom Penh-based dancer Prumsodm Ok—a Camodian-American and pioneer of the first Cambodian gay dance company Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA—demonstrates the meticulous form of Khmer dance. This short draws a parallel between the nature of film as a time machine and the dancing human body as both fundamentally dynamic and temporal. Within the frame beckons a prayer for healing and empowerment in the face of violence and conflict.

Tokyo Girl

Dir. Nebiro Hashimoto, 2019, 8 min.

A maximum-speed, sonic-visual collage that pierces the spirit of the contemporary zeitgeist through the perspective of a young woman navigating it. Featuring Mako Hiragi’s monologue and onscreen text, the film was produced in January of 2019, and very much situated in this window at the end of the Heisei era and before the commencement of then-nameless Reiwa. Endlessly creative, possibly nauseating, highly addicting, and super-relatable, *Tokyo Girl* is an intimate stimulus overload.

Experimental Shorts

Bath House of Whales

Dir. Mizuki Kiyama, 2019, 7 min.

Mizuki Kiyama’s short animation utilizes a paint on glass technique to render a young girl’s visit to a neighborhood *senjo* (bath house) with her mother with dazzling sensuous wonder. Evoking childish fascination at daily rituals, this quotidian act amidst feminine intimacy becomes a space of otherworldly fantasy. *Bath House of Whales* won the Lotte Reiniger Promotion Award for Animated Film at the Stuttgart International Festival of Animated Film in Germany.

Blind Bombing, Filmed by a Bat

Dir. Kota Takeuchi, 2020, 32 min., in English and Japanese with English subtitles.

During WWII, the Japanese army developed experimental balloons able to cross the Pacific Ocean and reach the West Coast of North America in 3-6 days. Armed with explosives, they were given the code name *fu-go*, or *fusen bakudan* (“fire balloons,” or balloon bombs) in an attempt to instill a culture of fear like that caused by the far more deadly American firebombing of Japanese cities. The U.S. responded by enacting a censorship campaign, requesting newspapers avoid reports of *fu-go* landings or sightings. Living near the remains of a *fu-go* launch site in Fukushima Prefecture, Takeuchi mimics their flight take-off using a drone camera, and, traveling to North America, follows their arrival across the shoreline and rural landscapes, using a bat’s echolocation as narrative device to place *fu-go* and Fukushima as echos across history.

Fuel

Dir. Yu Araki, 2019, 16 min.

Set in Kushiro, the northeastern port city in Hokkaido, *Fuel* quietly observes an expert griller working at one of the oldest *robatayaki* (fireside cooking) restaurants in Japan. A patient and contemplative film that matches the unhurried pace of the traditional slow cooking method, its precise use of sound and image savors the beauty of this unique grilling process.

Wheel Music

Dir. Nao Yoshigai, 2019, 14 min.

Rolling along on a bike or floating in a doctor’s office’s seasonal hamster display, *Wheel Music* explores the aesthetic feeling and social character of Sendagi, an old town in Tokyo under urban development in preparation for the planned Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. Filmed in 2018, as director Nao Yoshigai notes: “The present scenery might soon disappear. I went out by bicycle with my video camera. This is a ‘life road-movie documentary.’”

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Events listed alphabetically by title.

Collaboration and Community in Japanese Cinema During the Pandemic

Four film professionals discuss the current situation of the Japanese film industry and various initiatives launched in response to the difficulties faced during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Participants include filmmaker Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Yuko Iwasaki (Japan Community Cinema Center), Yuichi Watanabe (Tofoo Films), and Noriko Yamasaki (Osaka Cine Nouveau). Organized and moderated by independent film programmer and translator Aiko Masubuchi.

Nobuhiko Obayashi: A Conversation

In this special memorial event, a varied panel of participants discuss the legacy of filmmaker Nobuhiko Obayashi (1938-2020) in the wake of his passing and the release of his final film, *Labyrinth of Cinema*. Participants include Chigumi Obayashi, Noriki Ishitobi (*Asahi Shimbun*),

Yo Nakajima (Theater Kino, Sapporo), and actress Takako Tokiwa. Moderated by Japanese cinema scholar Aaron Gerow.

New Approaches to Documentary from Japan

Four documentary filmmakers featured in JAPAN CUTS 2020 discuss their works and thoughts on documentary cinema. Participants include Ian Thomas Ash, Nanako Hirose, Kaori Oda, and Kaori Sakagami. Organized and moderated by Amber Noé, Japan Society Film Associate.

About JAPAN CUTS: Festival of New Japanese Film

Founded in 2007, JAPAN CUTS is an annual film festival dedicated to screening the best of contemporary Japanese cinema. Organized by Japan Society in New York City, the festival is described as “New York’s premier Japanese cinema event” (*The Wall Street Journal*) and “an annual highlight of New York’s film calendar” (*The New York Times*). In addition to an exclusive slate of premiere film screenings, the festival offers free talk events and access to guest filmmakers and stars through post-screening Q&As and parties. Since its inception, the festival has attracted over 60,000 filmgoers, screened over 350 films and invited over 100 guests from Japan and beyond.

About Japan Society

Founded in 1907, Japan Society in New York City presents sophisticated, topical and accessible experiences of Japanese art and culture, and facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge and innovation between the U.S. and Japan. More than 200 events annually encompass world-class exhibitions, dynamic classical and cutting-edge contemporary performing arts, film premieres and retrospectives, workshops and demonstrations, tastings, family activities, language classes, and a range of high-profile talks and expert panels that present open, critical dialogue on issues of vital importance to the U.S., Japan and East Asia. For more information, call 212-832-1155 or visit japansociety.org.

Credits

JAPAN CUTS is sponsored by Shiseido Americas. Additional support is provided by Sapporo U.S.A., Inc. Japan Society Film's programs are generously supported by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Endowment Fund and Gaia Holistic Health Foundation/Dr. Kazuko Tatsumura-Hillyer. Additional season support is provided by The Globus Family, David Toberisky, Geoff and Fumi Matters, Laurel Gonsalves, James Read Levy, Masu Hiroshi Masuyama, Akiko Koide and Shohei Koide, Dr. Tatsuji Namba, George Gallagher, David S. Howe, Michael Romano, Hiroshi Tsuyuki and Yasuko Tsuyuki, and an anonymous donor. Transportation assistance is provided by Japan Airlines, the exclusive Japanese airline sponsor.

Media Contacts:

Allison Rodman, arodman@japansociety.org, 914-715-9794
Asako Sugiyama, asugiyama@japansociety.org, 212-715-1249

###