

THE “PERIOD OF TRANSITION” IN THE JAPANESE YOUTH CINEMA 1956-1960: FROM THE *TAIYOZOKU* PHENOMENON TO THE NEW WAVE

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Traditionally the History of Cinema has been elaborated from a Eurocentric point of view. My main motivation is incorporating the contributions of so called “Peripheral Cinemas” in a very specific field: the origins of the Japanese new wave.

The dissertation describes an evolution from the *taiyozoku* phenomenon to the Japanese *nuberu bagu*². The *taiyozoku* phenomenon has a literary origin; it starts with the publication of some of Shintaro Ishihara’s novels in 1956. The author presents a new generation of postwar youth, rebellious, without the traditional codes and values, who only look for sporadic sex and violence. The novels will become a great success and soon will be adapted for the screen. Ko Nakahira’s *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta kajitsu*, 1956) is probably one of the most representative examples of the *taiyozoku* genre (a subgenre of the youth cinema).

But soon some young directors will start using the *taiyozoku* in different ways. The dissertation intends to describe the transformation of the *taiyozoku* exemplified through three films: Ko Nakahira’s *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta kajitsu*, 1956), Yasuzo Masumura’s *Kisses* (*Kuchizuke*, 1957) and Nagisa Oshima’s *Cruel Story of Youth* (*Seshun zankoku monogatari*, 1960). The analysis allows us to see not only thematic changes but also aesthetic and formal innovations which will drive Japanese cinema to cinematic modernism.

While *Crazed Fruit* projects a view of wealthy idle young people living without worries who are lacking in moral codes and traditional values, *Kisses*, by following the difficulties of a working class couple, inaugurates a new cinema of social consciousness. Finally *Cruel Story of Youth* depicts delinquents and prostitutes in a dark and macabre view which characterizes most of the rest new wave films. While the first film shows a conservative view of “the youth as a problem,” the other two show a progressive perspective of “the problems of youth.”

Crazed Fruit is the second *taiyozoku* film and the first one starring Yujiro Ishihara, who would become a youth icon with clear influences from American idols like James Dean or Marlon Brando. The film had a big critical and commercial success. For some authors this film anticipates not only the Japanese new wave but also the spirit of some European films.

Kisses is the first of Yasuzo Masumura’s films. This director had studied at beginning of the fifties in Rome at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia where he came into contact with Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti and learned from the innovations of Neorealism. In his first period of films he uses to a large extent European concerns and sensitivities in order to apply them into the Japanese context with a new fresh and dynamic style. Masumura describes a more complex youth, showing how the older generation is responsible for their problems, caused by the oppressive new democracy and capitalist system. Now the problem will not be the youth but the economical structure which is dehumanizing the society.

The release of the third of Nagisa Oshima's films, *Cruel Story of Youth*, made critics talk about Japanese *nuberu bagu* for the first time. Oshima, as other new wave directors, inherits from *taiyozoku* the shocking use of two elements: sex and violence. However, he adds to the previous films (*Crazed Fruit* and *Kisses*) a deeper macabre, devastating and eccentric tone mixed with a real political context and a very personal and experimental style typical of the *cinema d'auteur*.

Oshima carries out the last transgression of the *taiyozoku* phenomenon in order to finish with it once and for all: he shows the most grotesque and dirtiest aspects brought by the capitalism and the liberal democracy imposed by the US after the Occupation. The young couple lives in the slums of Tokyo, prostitute themselves, swindle middle-age men, deal with yakuza... The film shows the darkest side of the human being and lowest part of the society in order to use it as a weapon against the hypocritical moral codes of the modern Japanese society.

The comparative analysis of the films with their national and international context show us important repercussions in general concepts usually linked to Japanese Cinema.

The specific nature of the Japanese mode of representation, as alternative to the Institutional Mode of Representation, is a recurrent question among scholars. Noël Burch in *To the Distant Observer*³ is the one who talked about it most categorically. Later discussions around the specificity of the Japanese cinema have been developed around Burch's early assumptions, which consider Japanese cinema: a unified text, isolated from the context, closely related with the ancient culture and traditional art expressions.

Nowadays we know that these hypotheses are a consequence of a partial knowledge in the West of Japanese cinema. During the 1950s when Japanese cinema began to be discovered through European film festivals, Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasuhiro Ozu obtained a big success with a cinema set in an ancient Japan, starred by samurais, geishas and traditional families. The delight of the European audiences was called by Antonio Weinrichter "the kimono effect" in *Pantalla amarilla*⁴. Some authors claim that this fact was a product of a deliberated policy carried out by the *majors* of the Japanese industry which promoted films reinforcing its national character. Those films were produced in order to be exported to the West, recreating the same image of Japan that Westerners had with the purpose of winning European festivals. However we recently know that there was another cinema aimed at the domestic market – like new wave films – which was not interested in showing Japan's exotic side.

In the same way, Audie Bock's contribution in *Japanese Film Directors*⁵, which classifies the Japanese directors historically into three categories (*Early Masters*, *Postwar Humanists*, *New Wave*), became very useful to my research. Bock's thesis confirmed ten years later by David Desser in *Eros plus massacre*⁶, identifying three different paradigms, suggests an important conclusion: Japanese cinema is not a unified text throughout its history but on the contrary we can distinguish different modes of representation. Once the difference between the postwar paradigm and the new wave has been recognized, we can identify what I have called "Period of Transition" (from 1956 to 1960) in order to explain the transfer from one model to another (changes in aesthetics and strategies, symbolic representations, etc.).

On the other hand, understanding Japanese cinema as a text isolated from any contemporary context was again the result of a partial knowledge of this cinema. In fact, the films studied here are closely linked to the social and political environment: massive student demonstrations against the Japan-US Security Treaty, the baby boom generation, the growing economy and organized crime... This makes it necessary to watch the films under David Bordwell's contribution of post-formal and poststructural analysis: a formal and structural approach to the film work but being very aware about contextual parameters (social, political, economical...), since they surround the director and inevitably mould any work of art. Thus the research must be done here from two dif-

ferent fields: semiotics, used to study the film text itself (the signified, ways of expression, and signify, the symbolic representations of youth); and Asian Studies, to define the context.

After this analysis we can observe how Japanese cinema is not so isolated from foreign experiences as earlier works suggest. To complete my research it has been necessary to incorporate comparative analysis with chronologically simultaneous film works at the international level: the question of youth in Europe; the generational gap and popular culture in United States; the thematic and formal changes in other new waves around the world... This reveals that for the first time in history, Japanese cinema seems to be affiliated to some international concerns: the problem of youth, popular music, jazz, rock 'n' roll, mass culture... Even Alexander Austruc's idea of *cinema d'auteur* seems to be related with the Japanese concept of *shutaisei* (subjectivity)...

We see how during this "Period of Transition" Japanese directors start developing strategies some of which are simultaneous and while others are precursors to other European new waves: hand-held camera, improvisational-looking, de-centering frames, dynamic editing, avoiding causal *raccords*, self-reflexive media and inter-textual references, variety of shot scale... All of them represent strategies that will build the cinematic modernity (*modanisuto-eiga*) of Japan.

Apparently the "period of transition" and the later new wave seem to break the harmony of the classical paradigm and finish with the idea of the Japanese cinema tied to its ancient culture and traditional arts. Nevertheless as I have said, this point just needed to be updated. A deeper analysis proves how this "Japanesness" has not disappeared but still remains hidden. Finally Japanese directors themselves admit that they cannot avoid their cultural background and their particular collective imagination, so religion, mythology and other cultural references are still there. We have to notice some similarities with other national new waves but we also have to talk about specific "Japanese" strategies, where the spectator can find an intention of reinventing the cinema by going back to its cultural origins.

Thus we can conclude that: during this period, 1956-1960, the *taiyozoku* phenomenon comes from some concerns in the international arena. It will test a process of transformation (symbolic, aesthetic and formal), well exemplified by the three films analyzed. This process will be precursor of the Japanese new wave and other new waves around the world as well. Despite some strategies that will be shared by other national cinemas, Japanese films will still keep the specific nature of its film body.

- 1 Supervisor: Prof. Vicente Sánchez-Biosca.
- 2 Japanese critics use to talk about the new wave as the *nuberu bagu*, a phonetic transcription from the French term *nouvelle vague*, and it is how the movement became known in Japan.
- 3 Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer. Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1979.
- 4 Antonio Weinrichter, *Pantalla amarilla: el cine japonés*, T&B, Madrid 2002.
- 5 Audie Bock, *Japanese Film Directors*, Kodansha International, New York 1978.
- 6 David Desser, *Eros plus massacre. An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1988.