Document Citation

Title	**Japanese cinema -- excerpt. 1946-1971, Shiro Toyoda**
Author(s)	Donald Richie
Source	*Doubleday & Company, Inc.*
Date	1971
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	77-95
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Yukiguni (Snow country), Toyoda, Shirô, 1957

the happy are honest. Only the open end is honest because life is open-ended. Life does not conclude, it merely stops, and this, in itself, implies continuity. This is the way of cinema because the movies are just like life. The very name of the early motion picture machine, the Vitascope, had—as Georges Sadoul points out—to do with "life."

Japanese film history shows us a people who in their cinema eventually realized this and turned further and further away from the all-or-nothing metaphysics of their classical stage. In the films of Ozu, of Naruse, of Mizoguchi, one finds an acceptance of the fortuitous, a "life is like that" smile which is as beautiful as it is useful. Such pictures are, of course, no monopoly of the Japanese —one remembers, from this same period, Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth*, René Clair's *Sous les Toits de Paris*, Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*. At the same time, however, such films were more common than in the West. What one regards as exceptional in Western cinema is a commonplace in Japan.

This accounts for the absence in Japanese film of both heroes and villains. One may find, to be sure, hundreds of Japanese pictures in which heroines are snow-white and villains are deepest-black but this, I submit, does not represent the true path of the Japanese cinema any more than such pictures in, say, America or Italy represent the true ways of those respective nations. Rather, in Japan as elsewhere, a recognition of the complication of human character is a prerequisite for any sort of meaningful experience, be it in life or on film.

The bias of Japan, however, insists that unattractive traits be accepted along with those perhaps more pleasing. There are many less reformed characters in Japanese cinema, and somehow becoming better is, indeed, not the major theme it has been in other national cinemas. Rather, bad is accepted along with good because it is there; it is part of things as they are.

This, of course, is again *mono no aware*, that awareness of the transience of all earthly things, the knowledge that it is, perhaps fortunately, impossible to do anything about it: that celebration of resignation in the face of things as they are.

Actions arising from this view of life are apt to be both melodramatic and sentimental but this is nothing against them, nor is the fact that some *mono no aware* films strongly suggest the Shimpa. After all, if a national theater can be said to reflect national attitudes and aspirations, Shimpa is a more representative national theater than, let us say, the Kabuki. *Mono no aware* films are sometimes unbearably sad and are often sentimental, but then, occasionally, so is Japan.

If Ozu actively celebrates the traditional life and Naruse actively dislikes it, we have at least two clear statements on the subject. Other directors, even those most concerned with it, seem, by comparison, irresolute. But from this irresolution comes a pliability which is perhaps more representative than anything else of the authentic Japanese attitude.

Shiro Toyoda's view of traditional culture is decidedly ambivalent and yet, perhaps because of this, most of

his better films find him involved with it. The young heroine of *Wild Geese* (Gan, 1953), a film known abroad as *The Mistress*, falls in love with a student she never has an opportunity to meet again. In the manner of all Naruse heroines she is punished for daring individuality. Then, in a long and extremely beautiful final scene, she wanders over the meadows where she first spoke with the student; turning, she watches the wild geese fly from the marsh. Toyoda turns to catch her face—and finds hope. We know all we need to complete the story.

In *Snow Country* (Yukiguni, 1957) the young geisha is traditional at heart and completely unaware of it. She considers herself very modern and part of this modernity is the kidding relationship she maintains with a young artist. Toyoda deftly removes the mask in one fine scene toward the middle of the film. The artist asks her to find him a geisha. Since she herself is a geisha, what he means—and his manner of asking makes it clear—is that he wants someone to sleep with. Until now their relationship has been that of geisha and casual customer, a relationship devoid of meaning and almost asexual in its playfulness. He has now, however, let her know that he is interested in more. Her reaction, wonderfully controlled both by Toyoda and by Keiko Kishi, playing the role, is one of confusion and retreat. She attempts to resume the traditional role of the geisha, artificial laughter, simulated disbelief, childish petulance. And, so far had she formerly discarded this role with him, she fails. Eventually she must lose her temper in order to retain her traditional self-respect. This brilliant piece of character

analysis is followed without comment by a master stroke: the very next scene, late at night, finds her drunk, coming into his room and flinging herself at him.

In their separate ways both the geisha and the young heroine of *Wild Geese* overcome tradition and Toyoda's occasional animosity toward the traditionally Japanese is, unlike that of Naruse, only rarely stated. One of his fullest statements, however, is found in one of his finest films: *Grass Whistle* (Mugibue, 1955).

It is the story of three adolescents, the girl still a child, the boys just growing into that long and difficult period which is prelude to manhood. They are good children, if a bit wild, and—like all children—they manage to live entirely outside the traditional society represented by their parents. But they are not immune to it. Their tragedy is not merely the coming of adulthood and the consequent loss of the candor of childhood, more specifically it is their subscribing to attitudes and beliefs, properly traditional in themselves, which have no relevance to their own problems.

One of the boys dies. His friend had loved him, and the girl had loved him; and, in the honest manner of children, both boy and girl also love each other. In the final sequence of the film they go to the grave of their friend and the boy attempts to tell her what he feels. Already old enough to distrust her emotions, she almost hysterically subscribes to whatever ideas of morality she has already absorbed from the grown-ups. It becomes evil to think of herself in the presence of the dead—rather, she must remain faithful to a memory which is already

false. And in the final scene—a snow storm on the beach where only the summer before the three had been children together—she runs away from the boy who loves her and whom she loves, leaving him to face alone this first indication of the quality of being adult.

Toyoda's perhaps typical ambivalence is seen in films like the uneven *Evening Calm* (Yunagi, 1957). The heroine—Ayako Wakao, then Japan's most modern modern-girl—discovers that her mother is a prostitute and the boy she herself is in love with is her own half-brother. This admittedly disconcerting turn of events turns her against her completely untraditional mother. In the final scene we find her in kimono, working in a bookstore, and very properly refusing to assist a foreigner who is looking for books on the Yoshiwara, the old licensed quarter of Tokyo. Toyoda has said that he finds her actions "beautiful," and that "she acts as she does in order to protest the ugly confusion of present-day Japan." In other words, in order to protest she turns toward the traditional.

Perhaps because he, like so many Japanese, directors or not, has decidedly ambivalent feelings toward the traditional patterns of Japanese life, Toyoda's best films are those in which he treats an essentially serious theme —the conflict between the demands of a traditional society and the always untraditional inclination of the individual—in a comic manner.

In that delightful comedy *A Cat, Shozo, and Two Women* (Neko to Shozo to Futari no Onna, 1956), Toyoda has the dense but individualistic hero, beautifully played by Hisaya Morishige, much more in love with his cat than with either of his wives. This brings him into direct conflict with both his mother and the first wife, absolute dragons of respectability. And also, oddly, with his second—a mambo-crazed modern type. Shozo's position is that of so many Japanese: he is equally repelled by both extremes. He resents tradition but is afraid of the anarchy of complete personal freedom. Shozo is only happy with his cat, an animal absolutely selfish but reassuringly domesticated.

Marital Relations (Meoto Zenzai, 1955)—probably Toyoda's finest film—takes the same theme, the compromise between traditional ideals and personal freedom. This is a story of a charming young no-good and his somewhat unwilling geisha mistress—played by Hisaya Morishige and Chikage Awashima—who eventually and almost uncomprehendingly give up every one of the benefits of the traditional Japanese life—respectability, power, material well-being—in order to be together. But the true strength of this very funny and very sad film is Toyoda's tacit assumption that, since both are selfish, they are really thinking of their own personal freedom. Yet, unable to make the final break, which would be from each other, they—like lovers in some comic inferno—are doomed to each other's loving companionship throughout life. This is emphasized in a bittersweet coda (somewhat resembling that lovely final scene in *A Cat, Shozo, and Two Women* where the hero, drenched by a summer shower, finally finds his cat and, picking it up, says: "We will go away together . . . we won't come back,")

where the wastrel and the fallen geisha go off in the snow together, a scene all the more clever in that it is a completely recognizable parody of the *michiyuki*, that Kabuki convention where the traditional lovers set out into the cold, cold world.

In Japan as elsewhere comedy makes the unpalatable not only sweet but nourishing and though Toyoda has used the same theme over and over again—notably in the serious but excellent *Twilight Story* (Bokuto Kidan, 1960)—he has not again equaled the humanity of *Marital Relations*, a film which perfectly epitomizes the dilemma of the Japanese caught between mutually contradictory values—an epitome, perfectly recognized by the Japanese audience, which made it one of their most popular films.

And it is an awareness of humanity, its aspirations and its longings, that sets the traditionalism of Toyoda or Naruse off from that of Ozu and Mizoguchi. The message of the latters' films—if works of art so perfectly self-contained can be said to have a message—is that freedom is found in limitations. The message, much more apparent, in the films of Naruse and Toyoda, is that the price of freedom is high. It means complete loss of all security (something which the Japanese perhaps more than most people fear). Only the very strong—Naruse's characters are admittedly weak—can possibly afford it.

Hence, perhaps, the attitude of these latter directors toward the young. Toyoda openly champions them. "I think that, even though humanity is filled with ugliness,

No Regrets for Our Youth, 1946. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Setsuko Hara, Susumu Fujita.

Utamaro and His Five Women, 1946. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Toshiko Mizuka, Minosuke Bando.

The Record of a Tenement Gentleman, 1947. Directed by Yasujiro Ozu. Choko Iida, Reikichi Kawamura.

Floating Clouds, 1955. Directed by Mikio Naruse. Masayuki Mori, Hideko Takamine.

She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum, 1955. Directed by Keisuke Kinoshita. Noriko Arita, Shinji Tanaka.

Grass Whistle, 1955. Directed by Shiro Toyoda. Kyoko Aoyama, Akira Kubo.

beauty still exists, particularly in the younger generation. This is perhaps the reason that I am so interested in it."

One finds in the films of Naruse and Toyoda a very sympathetic attitude toward the young. The heroines of *Wild Geese* and *Floating Clouds* break with traditional virtue and the directors approve. The second wife in *A Cat, Shozo, and Two Women* is shown as dreadful but she is certainly no worse than the hidebound first. The younger brother's wife in Naruse's *Anzukko* (1958) is perhaps a rather extreme example of the untraditional girl—she makes her husband do the laundry—but she is not unsympathetic.

On the other hand, Ozu's young people are treated in a very hard manner indeed. The errant daughter in *Tokyo Twilight* is killed; the office flirt in *Early Spring* is ostracized. The young people in *Floating Weeds* and *Equinox Flower*, even the children in *Good Morning* (Ohayo, 1959), a partial remake of *I Was Born, But . . .* are saved only by their forced inclusion into the family unit. Ozu differs markedly from a director like Heinosuke Gosho, who shows people escaping from the traditional and approves them, as in *Where Chimneys Are Seen* (Entotsu o Mieru Basho, 1953); or thoroughly disapproves the traditional, as in *Growing Up* (Takekurabe, 1955); or who romanticizes it, as in *Firefly Light* (Hotarubi, 1958). Ozu would seem to believe the traditional even beneficial. If he, instead of Gosho, had made *Growing Up*, one wonders if he could have brought himself to approve of enforced prostitution. To be thoroughly consistent he should have found the ideal