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Nippon Connection's Anti-Canon

By Abé Mark Nornes

This spring, I had the pleasure of attending Frankfurt's [Nippon Connection](#). [1] I had heard about this event for years, and finally managed a visit. It was an amazing scene, vivacious and serious all at once. The experience made me reflect on the history of these kinds of Japanese film events. Had this taken place a decade or two earlier, one would probably have called it "challenging" or "heterodox." However, things have changed, and we have arrived at a very interesting time for those of us who love Japanese cinema (but live in faraway places and are dependent on these affairs). When Jasper Sharp invited me to write something "personal" for Midnight Eye as it hit the 5-year mark, I decided it would be the perfect place to review Nippon Connection. Both the German event and Midnight Eye itself are symptomatic of exciting shifts in film culture, shifts that I will narrate in my own experience of Japanese film as a distant observer of sorts.



I first discovered Japanese film through Godzilla and 1960s TV animation, and then a high-school sweetheart introduced me to Kurosawa and Mizoguchi as I reached high school. This should hardly be surprising, since these were the only routes available to someone growing up in a rural city in Colorado. This was long before the age of videotape, so the only access to foreign film was the college film society. Asian cinema amounted to Japanese cinema + Satyajit Ray. When I moved to Los Angeles in the early 1980s, it was little different. The art houses like the Nuart Theater helped me tick off the films of Oshima and Imamura, but I still saw them in the framework of international art cinema.

Today I am struck by how unrepresentative this was of Japanese film; it makes me wonder what, exactly, it was a representation of (or who it belonged to). Books afforded glimpses of other tantalizing regions of Japanese cinema - Ozu, the silent cinema, the pink cinema, the yakuza film, and on and on - but there was no way to actually see these films. More importantly, those same books gave one the distinct impression that it was all over. In *Japanese Film Directors* (1978) Audie Bock wrote of a "period of lull or retrenchment" (12). [Donald Richie](#) threw his considerable critical weight behind this narrative of decline, ending his "terminal essay" for the revised version of *The Japanese Film* (1982) on the most depressing of notes:

"Perhaps the preeminence of the Japanese film is lost forever. It was predicated, after all, upon an audience that was able to look at itself as it was and draw solace, instruction, and pleasure from the view. There is no longer any such audience. The Japanese now, like everyone else, only want to be shown themselves as they would want to be. That ability to honestly evaluate, recognize, and accept that so distinguished this audience (and hence the films) has quite vanished, along with much else of traditional Japan. The Japanese audience has been just as brutalized by the violent, the mindless, the wish-fulfilling, both on TV and the screen, as any other audience. (477)"

A few pages before in his separate essay, Joseph Anderson pronounced the present-day film industry "Japan's answer to Chrysler" (456). A short six years later, this sentiment was reiterated in the next major work on Japanese cinema, David Desser's *Eros Plus Massacre* (1988). Desser starts out his book on the New Wave by painting a bleak picture of the "grim tide" of industrial decline under the "onslaught of television." His first chapter presents three dominant paradigms for Japanese cinema based on eras first described by Audie Bock. Desser is careful to avoid a diachronic structure in this triptych, arguing that one does not displace the other. However, their names - classical, modern, modernist, suggests this is precisely what has happened. The overall structure of his book equally suggests a narrative arc of emergence, development, "deconstruction" and decline. The last paragraph the book sent a powerful, if familiar, message:

"The spirits of Noe Ito and Sakae Osugi resurfaced [in Yoshida's *Eros + Massacre*, 1968] not to haunt the '60s generation, but to inspire it. But haunt them it did nevertheless as, like Osugi and Ito, the '60s generation passed away, killed off not by the brutality of the militarists but by the more insidious forces of economic cooptation and intimidation. Susumu Hani, Yoshishige Yoshida, and Nagisa Oshima, among the most important of the Japanese New Wave directors, found themselves, at the end of the '60s, left with nothing but ghosts save for a will to film, knowing that by then filming had become impossible. (212)"

This stark image of a national film culture being ravaged by television and newly insipid audiences became extremely powerful in the 1980s. Japanese has a convenient word for this kind of situation: *teisetsu*, a discourse that has become fixed. Its explanatory power beyond doubt, it circulates to inflect every approach, every viewing, every writing, every conversation.

We can thank these books for setting this image of violent extinction, but there were other factors. The most important was probably the film festival circuit and art film distributors. Their intertwining efforts acted like a conduit through which the heterogeneity of Japanese film culture was winnowed out. I discovered this

through my initial glimpse at the inside of the film festival scene, when I worked as an intern on the 1988 Hawai'i International Film Festival. By this time, I had already traveled to Japan and other parts of Asia, and spent untold hours with diasporic audiences in LA's Little Tokyo, Chinatown, and Monterey Park. In these theaters, and also thanks to the thriving piracy market in Asian grocery stores, I knew that the teisetsu of televisual decimation was erroneous, or suspicious at the very least. I sensed a vibrant film culture that was not making it to the consciousness of the American art film crowd. At Hawai'i I saw one reason why.

Starting in the 1980s there was a global proliferation of international film festivals. This resulted in some welcome specialization. There had been Asia-centered festivals within the region, most notably the Asian Film Festival. This had begun in 1954 as an attempt by film executives and government culture bureaucrats to forge a unified Asian market separate from the West; this probably helps explain why it never made a dent on the larger film festival circuit. However, in the 1980s, Hong Kong Film Festival and the East-West Center's Hawai'i International Film Festival became known as the places to go to find the latest offerings from Asia. Critics, filmmakers, programmers and scholars from around the world converged on these two sites.



It was exciting to be on the inside. Hawai'i was working hard to find new films and filmmakers, and especially to capture those precious premieres - North American, or better yet, "World Premiere." Both Hawai'i and Hong Kong enjoyed wonderfully smart programming, and accompanied their films with very impressive catalogs (the kind you keep forever). The year I interned at the East-West Center, Hawai'i had major retrospectives celebrating Raj Kapoor and postwar Vietnamese cinema. They screened the latest work by Bae Chang-Ho, Chen Kaige, Stanley Kwan, Rahim Razali, Merata Mita, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, as well as new films by Asian-American artists. As for Japanese film, it was hard to think of it as dead-in-the-water when one looked at the Hawai'i programming. Over the space of a couple years, the festival hosted the new work of filmmakers like Nagisa Oshima, Juzo Itami, Shinsuke Ogawa, Go Takamine, Kazuo Hara, Akira Kurosawa, Sumiko Haneda, Mitsuo Yanagimachi, and Kon Ichikawa. Just as this list implies a wealth of talent and interesting filmmaking, the texts of their catalogs was invariably upbeat and forward-looking.

At the same time, the films do fit a certain profile familiar to anyone interested in foreign films. This was an auteur's cinema, even when it ranged into the documentary form. Unfortunately, the optimism one felt at Hawaii and Hong Kong did not infect the rest of the world when it came to the image of Japanese cinema. There are at least a couple major reasons that have nothing to do with the state of Japanese film itself. In their ecstatic search for the new, programmers and audiences were just discovering Hong Kong and mainland China (and Taiwan to a lesser extent; Yang, Hou and company would have to wait for the enthusiasm for the other two waned before they got the attention they deserved). This situation surely resonated against the teisetsu, structuring Japanese cinema as a dystopia in opposition to the emerging riches from its neighbors. And in the last five or six years, Korea has managed to take their place.

A second factor was the way films made their way to the festival circuit in the first place. At Hawai'i I could see that there was a miniscule set of sources that everyone was tapping for their information. Donald Richie was directing their attention to films he thought worthy, as were Kazuko Kawakita, Tadao and Hisako Sato, and Akira Shimizu at the Kawakita Film Library. Most of the programmers that invested in the expensive effort to visit Japan were particularly dependent on Kawakita. This was perhaps inevitable, considering few if any of them could speak or read Japanese. However, one cannot discount the importance of taste. A certain

kind of film was being exported, rendering everything else invisible.

This all changed in the 1990s, and looking back it is striking how quickly it happened. Hawai'i and Hong Kong were no longer attracting the kind of attention they once did, and everyone was talking about Pusan and Rotterdam. A new set of programmers and advisors appeared that were bilingual; they were also more youthful and eclectic in taste. Some were fans working in Japan in jobs that had nothing to do with film. Others were Japanese nationals studying and/or working abroad, talented subtitlers, and enthusiastic graduate students from all over the world.

Technology helped as well. Information was circulating in new ways. Back at the 1988 festival in Honolulu everyone was excited by the new fax machines; we were still writing plenty of paper letters and telexes, but the snail-like speed was already painful to bear. The fax machine was impressive, but what really floored me was this thing the East-West Center had called the Arpanet. Unfortunately, it was still the domain of the government and research universities, so it wasn't much use to the film festival. I used it to correspond with my father the scientist, but the festival organizers didn't even know this precursor to the internet existed right under their noses. However, within a few years everyone was relying on email, which enabled the creation of electronically connected communities like [Kinema Club/KineJapan](#) and indispensable publications like *Midnight Eye*.

At the very same time, videotapes and DVDs enabled people access to films that were heretofore available only to people with institutional connections that opened doors to the archives. Thanks to all these developments, expertise on Japanese cinema came to be disseminated among a wide variety of profiles, and unexplored regions of the national cinema suddenly became both visible and accessible. Looking around, it should be obvious to anyone that Japanese cinema was very much alive - and kicking ass.

This finally brings me to Nippon Connection, whose existence embodies this incredible shift in every way imaginable. First conceived in 1999, it marks the moment when this complex of developments reached a kind of stability, or even a kind of maturity. It was in this year that two film students at Frankfurt's Goethe University, Holger Ziegler and Marion Klomfass, found themselves frustrated as they watched the films of Kitano, Kawase, Imamura bypass Frankfurt as they circulated through the major festivals like Venice and Cannes. They decided to take things into their own hands and organize local screenings with the help of like-minded friends and the Japan Foundation's 16mm collection. They quickly found 16mm restricting, and added a few films on 35mm.

The first event took place in April 2000, with a modest lineup of 13 titles and two guests from Japan (director [Nobuhiro Yamashita](#) and Kenichiro Isoda, the musician for Nabbie's Love). Worried that English-subtitles may turn off people who would otherwise be interested in such an event, they also added various cultural activities to attract people to the screenings. They planned for some 1,500 people, and were surprised when more than 10,000 showed up.



The success inspired them to make it an annual event, and they converted themselves into a non-profit organization called Nippon Connection e.V. After skipping 2001 while people were busy graduating, their basic approach was set with the second event in 2002. They split the film event into Nippon Cinema for feature films and Nippon Digital, which created space for experimental shorts and features produced on video

or computers. Starting in 2003, they added a retrospective section with the cooperation of the German Film Museum, which has celebrated prewar/wartime animation and the works of individual artists like Koji Yamamura, [Suzuki Seijun](#) and Koji Wakamatsu. As more guests came from Japan and elsewhere, they added lectures, interviews, and discussions, both at the festival site and at the Frankfurt House of Literature.

The cultural events continued alongside the film screenings. They included the usual, traditional obsessions, such as kendo, aikido, go, origami, shodo, taiko, tea ceremony, and kimono - not to mention the use of cute young women in the festival's catalogs, posters and trailer. At the same time, it should not be surprising that they have opened up "culture" to include manga, sushi and soba. One room is devoted to shiatsu or a sake workshop, and another to the latest video games (who can argue with that?). At night, people dance to the sounds of DJs and bands. In the lobby, the festival goods are sold at a table covered with mundane but fun trinkets you'd find in any Japanese drugstore, and there's Japanese beer at the bar. They probably court accusations of stereotyping, but it never feels that way. Rather, the film festival is among the most festive I've had the pleasure of attending.

The organizers have also blurred the line between exhibitors and producers of Japanese culture. In 2003, Nippon Connection initiated the Exchanging Tracks Project. After sampling the sounds of the Tokyo subway system, an aural snatch of everyday life, they had a wide range of international artists confabulate music. These in turn were handed to Japanese directors who made shorts based on the music. Two CDs and many films have resulted from these collaborations, which are sold and screened at every festival (often with the artists present).

The film festival within the festival is clearly the main event. While the editions through 2006 have maintained the tripartite structure - cinema, digital, retro - the programming is anything but predictable. One could say they strive to construct the anti-canon. They show a little bit of everything, privileging nothing. In 2006, spectators only interested in the feature films would be able to watch recent films making waves on the festival circuit, such as [Bashing](#) (2005) and *Loft* (2004); however, they would also run up against popular melodramas (*Always-Sunset on Third Street*, 2005), dumb special effects extravaganzas (*Ashura*, 2005) and delightful pink films (*The Strange Saga of Hiroshi the Freeloading Sex Machine*, 2005). It was clear, however, that plenty of people circulated between this venue and Nippon Digital, where just about anything goes. The Nippon Digital section shows animation of every kind, video art, narrative shorts, video features, found footage pieces, omnibus works, documentaries, music videos, and even television commercials. One of the ways Nippon Connection assembles such an unlikely assortment of works is through productive collaborations with a variety of institutions in Japan, such as Pia Film Festival, the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, Nihon University, [The Film School of Tokyo](#), [Planet Studyo +1](#), and Animation Soup. In the past few years, they've shown between 150 and 220 works over a long weekend.

As the festival grew it attracted more and more guests. This year over 50 guests came, 42 of whom were from Japan. Many of the filmmakers appeared with their films. Some were singled out for podium discussions; for example, Tom Mes interviewed Toshiaki Toyoda and Jasper Sharp led a discussion with Hisayasu Sato. Haruhiko Arai gave an impassioned speech at the same stage in defense of screenwriters. At the German Film Museum, Koji Wakamatsu showed his early work and sat on a panel devoted to Sex and Politics in Cinema with Sato, Yuji Tajiri, Roland Domenig and myself.

I began this look at Nippon Connection in a roundabout fashion to measure the astounding transformation our image of Japanese "film" has undergone over the last twenty years. One can still see films in Frankfurt that would easily have fit into slots at the 1988 Hawai'i Film Festival. What is extraordinary is that they are thrown together with every other kind of moving image culture, forcing spectators to make the connections. Also significant is what is absent from their catalogs' acknowledgements page: Donald Richie, Tadao Sato, and Kawakita Memorial Film Library. It's not that these people are stuck in the past (simply consider the recent writings of people like Richie or Desser). [[2](#)] What has changed is, well, everything - particularly the

people running the show.

Certainly one reason Nippon Connection is so interesting that the staff is all non-professional. It is essentially fan run and world-class. They have achieved their considerable scale by impressive fundraising and donations in kind. Only 40% of their budget comes from public monies (Oberhausen, for example, gets 90% for a considerably larger budget). Of course, the other major source of funds comes from the 16,000 people who pack the screenings. This will undoubtedly be difficult to sustain. Being non-professional may give organizers the kind of perspective to be creatively anti-canonical; however, it also means that no one is paid for their considerable labor.

With its radical heterogeneity, Nippon Connection is clearly one of the most important events in Japanese film culture, in both its international and domestic dimensions. There is simply no other event I can think of with the same measure of eclectic breadth and innovative programming. And Midnight Eye is indispensable for the very same reason. The teisetsu of decline and ruin has, as they say in the business, legs. It refuses to go away. Indeed, every once in a while it leaks into the electronic ether of KineJapan, only to cause a digital firestorm of protest. This is why one of the most important aspects of Nippon Connection is its outreach program, which is sending a package of films to Berlin, Leipzig, Madrid, Barcelona, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Michigan and Brazil. One look at their catalog is enough to convince anyone that "Japanese cinema" is among the most vital around. Indeed, it has been since the silent era, but whether this was recognized in a given historical moment too often depended on what people were open to seeing - as well as what they were allowed to see. In this sense, there has never been a more exciting time for Japanese film. One only needs to keep reading Midnight Eye, and then visit Nippon Connection from April 18-22 in 2007.

[1.] I must thank Holger Ziegler, Marion Klomfass and Alexander Zahlten for briefing me on the background of Nippon Connection. I am especially grateful to Alex, who went to much trouble to introduce me to the history of the collective.

[2.] Donald Richie. *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2005; David Desser. "Consuming Asia: Chinese and Japanese Popular Culture and the American Imaginary," in *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia* ed. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 179-199

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Professor Nornes has also been a coordinator for the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival since 1990, where he programmed major retrospectives such as *Japan-America Film Wars*, *In Our Own Eyes - Indigenous People's Film and Video Festival*, and *Den'ei Nana Henge: Seven Transfigurations in Electric Shadows*. He has two books forthcoming from Minnesota UP. *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary* (Minnesota UP) is the critical biography of Ogawa Productions, and *Traffic* is a theoretical and historical look at the role of translation in film history.]

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