

The Japanese regards his surroundings as an extension of himself, and it is this attitude that creates the atmosphere of the Japanese film at its best.

The content of the Japanese film is not much different from that of the film of other countries: motion pictures all over the world are concerned with the same things. Its period film is roughly equivalent to the American Western; its home drama is perfectly at home in England, France, or Germany. What is unique about the Japanese film is its form, the way in which the story is told, the angle from which it is viewed. This perspective accounts for the quality which we recognize as uniquely Japanese. We see it in the painting and the literature of the country, and we can recognize it in the language and in the lives of the people.

In the film we may begin by defining what it is not. One might think, for example, that in a country with some of the most developed theatrical techniques in the world, the influence of the traditional theater would be both natural and common. Yet this is not true. Noh has had no influence. Its use in a film like Kurosawa's *The Throne of Blood* (the witch, the background music, the timing of the intimate scenes, the makeup) was both conscious and experimental. Likewise, Kabuki has had small influence. Though some plays, notably *The Loyal Forty-seven Ronin*, are also screen favorites, the adaptations owe little to Kabuki style. When some elements do appear, as in Kinoshita's *The Ballad of the Narayama* or Shinoda's *The Scandalous Adventures of Buraikan*, it is a rare occurrence indeed. The influence of the Shimpa

is seen in many of the themes of the Japanese film, but of its technique there are few traces; in fact, overcoming the influence of the Shimpa was one of the Japanese film's earliest triumphs. Even Shingeki, the modern theater (one quite analogous to that of America or Europe), has offered almost nothing to the Japanese film style. In the same way, television—a medium which has had an enormous and not always beneficial influence on the American film—has contributed as yet little to Japanese cinematic form. At most one might say (and it is, admittedly, saying much) that the influence of Japanese drama on Japanese film is interior. That is, the kind of mind which created the Noh and the Kabuki remains the mind which creates the Japanese film.

One might then think that the films of other countries have been a decisive influence, a common enough occurrence in France or America, countries which have eclectic cinematic traditions. And on one level there is some foreign influence. The Japanese "action" picture, particularly the gangster film, is much influenced by the American, as indeed are all the world's gang films. Yet on the higher level, as represented by the best directors, there is almost none at all. Or, perhaps better, there is none visible. In the history of each director there has been some. That we no longer see it in the most experienced directors leads us directly to a basic assumption in the definition of Japanese film style: the Japanese are unable to handle anything without sooner or later nationalizing it—or, perhaps better put, the peculiar Japanese genius is that of assimilation and incorporation. Any influence

in Japan, be it gagaku or rock, is assimilated, digested, and turned into something sometimes rich, often strange, and always Japanese.

The process may take years, or it may take centuries, but the end result is a refinement, a distillation. Chinese ink and brush techniques have, in Japan, been rarefied into one of the most evocative, austere, economical, and aesthetically satisfying of art forms. Buddhist precepts have, as though under intense pressure, yielded *mono no aware*. The heightened form of the acceptance of the natural, which Japan shares with all of Asia, is also the result of the Japanese genius for assimilation. The art of the *bonsai*, the creation and cultivation of miniature trees; the natural artifice of Japanese landscape gardening; the open and visible structure of Japanese architecture—all speak of a truce with nature which the West has long found both mysterious and intriguing.

The equally Japanese tendency toward classification is another characteristic of the films. The Western director usually thinks of his film as an entity; the Japanese is usually conscious that he is working within a given genre. There is, as we shall see, the division between *gendai-geki* and *jidai-geki*; there are various subdivisions such as the *haha-mono* and *tsuma-mono*.

In all of the various genres, however, the treatment is somewhat dissimilar to that of the West, in that a film's initial assumption is not based upon a relative and philosophical good and evil but upon an absolute and social good and evil. One may affirm this, as does Ozu; may question it, as does Naruse; or may turn against it,

as does Imai or Oshima. It remains a fact. Thus *Rashomon* with its multiple worlds of reality presented a line of thought uncommon to the Japanese.

In the Japanese drama there is usually but one reality; it is the rare drama or film that penetrates beneath the surface of existence. For this reason, perhaps, most Japanese films are more concerned with emotionalism than with any higher tragic feeling. To the Japanese, Hamlet is simply a faithful son avenging his father's death. He is consequently a good son, who loves his mother as all good sons should. One of the many reasons for this lack of what the Western world might consider the higher emotions is that the individual and his problems are—in art, if not in life—sacrificed to the well-being of society, and in Japan, society remains the family system.

It now becomes easier to appreciate the oblique perspectives of such directors as Ozu and Kurosawa. The former may affirm, and the latter may protest, but both statements are predicated upon a basic assumption involving the Japanese and the world he lives in. Ozu's strength as a film artist derives from the honesty of his affirmation, the beauty of his phrasing, and a flawless dedication to things as they are. Kurosawa's strength is the splendid vitality of his protest, the candor of his observations, and his superb technical facility.

This candor created the realism of the Japanese film style, one which, for better or for worse, has always insisted that life be seen as it is. This honesty created the films about ordinary people, about the lives of the unhappy, about life as it really is. And it reflects that feeling

for nature, so utterly Japanese, which sees the natural world as an extension of man himself.

This attitude toward nature permeates Japanese art, the earliest poems as well as the latest films. It has developed the haiku, a poem in which the essence of a natural situation is fully suggested with an absolute minimum of words. In the haiku an occurrence or, more often, the conjunction of two occurrences is described, and from this conjunction a third image arises in the mind of the reader.

It is shown in the feeling for the elements: the rain scenes in so many Japanese films—Kurosawa's battle in the rain in *Seven Samurai*; the departure through the snow in Ichikawa's *The Outcast*; the almost palpable feeling of the sun in films as otherwise dissimilar as *Twenty-four Eyes* and *The Island*. Likewise this attitude toward nature is seen in the treatment of seasons: of which even the titles of Ozu's postwar films constitute a catalogue. *Late Spring* occurs just before the violence of the monsoon, a season of quiet and content and stillness. It is a parallel to the story, in which the daughter passes from the quiet content of unmarried life with her father into the stormier existence of a late marriage.

This Japanese love and understanding of nature is responsible too for the extraordinarily rich patina of the Japanese film. The Japanese is interested in how a thing is seen—indeed, often to the detriment of the thing seen itself—and he habitually sees it (in contradistinction to most other peoples) in its own natural context. The richness of *Ugetsu*, of *Rashomon*, of *Souls on the Road*, and

of *Crossroads* is a consequence of the directors' realization that environment not only creates character but is also indispensable in communicating what this character means. The omniscient eye of *Seven Samurai* and *Ikiru*; the steady gaze of *Sansho the Bailiff* and *The Life of Oharu*; the calm regard of *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story*—all are fundamentally concerned not only with seeing man and his environment but also with capturing that mood or atmosphere without the reality of which any view can be but partial.

The Japanese cinema at its finest has given the world a unique view of the human dilemma, and has interpreted this predicament with honesty and insight. By showing us man as an antagonist, with alternatives and the necessity of choice, it has given us a symbol meaningful to this century. It has given us the most perfect reflection of a people in the history of world cinema. More important, it has in the last analysis transcended the boundaries of race and nation, time and place, to produce an art form that moves us to an acknowledgment of our real selves, which—all considerations of culture and nationality aside—allows us partially to comprehend the pattern of life itself.

Elucidating this quality is what I have attempted in this book. For this reason one will find small emphasis placed upon the history of the Japanese film, and none at all upon its industrial basis. Those interested in a complete historical survey might read *The Japanese Film*:

Art and Industry, published in 1959, which I wrote with Joseph L. Anderson.

The present volume is based upon *Japanese Movies*, which was first published in 1961 by the Japan Travel Bureau and is now out of print. This is, at the same time, however, a new work. Not only does it include the past decade, its directors and their films, it also represents later thoughts and, hopefully, fresh insights. In addition, most of the stills used to illustrate the text are different from those in the earlier volume, and some are appearing for the first time in a Western publication.

The historical introductory sections are much the same, however, and it has again been most convenient to arrange the various directors in an admittedly somewhat artificial spectrum from right to left: that is, from those concerned with traditional values to those concerned with a more overt questioning of these values, or with other values entirely. If I have only briefly indicated the general loss of quality in the bulk of Japanese films—a hopefully transient state which first became obvious during the last decade—it is because I am concerning myself with an overall pattern and its continuance. If, in tracing the more elusive Japanese qualities of the Japanese cinema, I have perhaps seemed to suppress a number of films and a number of people important to Japanese film history, it is because I am tracing the development of a style and include consequently only those who most contributed to it.

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