"What is contemporary Japanese Cinema?". Questioning the answers, answering with questions

Giacomo Calorio

Abstract: The English title of a recent book by renowned film scholar Yomota Inuhiko reads: *What is Japanese Cinema?*. In the preface to the English edition Yomota states that the direction we might take, should we try to provide an answer to the question, changes according to which word, «Japanese» or «Cinema» we choose to emphasize. When his survey reaches the recent past, the Japanese scholar describes the 2000s as «an era of chaos». Starting from these questions and affirmations, and combining them with others made by scholars such as David Bordwell, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, Andrew Dorman and Mori Naoyuki, the following article attempts to explore a more specific doubt: what is contemporary Japanese cinema? In so doing, however, other questions arise, as we need to define when contemporaneity starts and what makes it different both from previous eras, and from the contemporaneity of other national cinemas. The further we probe, the more complex our definition becomes.

Keywords: contemporary Japanese cinema; Japanese film theory; visual culture, digital culture.

要旨:『What is Japanese Cinema?』（日本映画とは何か）とは、著名な映画史研究者、四方田犬彦の最新のエッセイの英訳版のタイトルである。四方 田はその序文で、「Japanese」という言葉に重きを置くか、「Cinema」という言葉に重きを置くかによって、疑問に対する答えを導くであろう探究の方向性が変わってくるのではないかと述べている。現代映画の研究に至り、四方田は、2000年代を混沌の時代と定義している。こういった問いや断言から出発し、他の研究者たちの疑問と絡み合わせながら、本稿では、「現代日本映画とは何か」という更に具体的な疑問に対する答えを求めようとしている。ただし、そのための様々な疑問が生じる。まず、日本映画の現代性がいつから始まるのか、それまでの日本映画の時代とは何が異なるのか、また、他の国の映画の現代性とは何が異なるのかを明確にする必要がある。しかし、話題を深く掘り下げれば掘り下げるほど、その定義は拡大し、とらえどころのない話題になっていく。

キーワード: 現代日本映画、日本映画論、ビジュアル文化、デジタル文化.

1. Questions and coordinates

The English title of a recent book about Japanese cinema by renowned film scholar Yomota Inuhiko (Yomota 2019 [2014]) reads: *What is Japanese Cinema?* In the preface to the English edition, Yomota states:

> «Japanese cinema» is made up of two words: «Japanese» and «cinema». For those who are interested in Japanese cinema, the choice of which of those words to emphasize makes a big difference in the direction of their explorations. […] Which of these two perspectives is correct? In fact, both are correct and both are necessary.

> Although Japanese cinema cannot be separated from the cultural particularities of Japan, we must also see it as a part of the universal history of humanity's desire for images and movement (*Ibidem*: XVI-XVII).

Following a thorough examination of the history of Japanese cinema from such a perspective, and whilst addressing the contemporary era, Yomota writes: «The 2000s was an era of chaos» (*Ibidem*: 186). Andrew Dorman also discusses contemporary Japanese cinema and its cultural specificity in his *Paradoxical Japaneseness*, an essay which focuses on cultural performance and concealment phenomena concerning Japanese cinema in a global context. In the introduction, Dorman states: «Any film, in one way or another, is specific to the country that produces it. Whether it displays specific cultural images, articulates 'national issues' or is simply made in a particular location, a film carries with it an inherent nationality according to which it may be situated contextually» (Dorman 2016: 1). Prior to these considerations, and without wanting to bring into our discourse the debate surrounding the identity of Japanese cinema in a new pan-asian, global and transnational perspective, a necessary step is the formalist approach by which, roughly forty years ago, Noël Burch strived to investigate (or rather, to demonstrate) the specificity of Japanese cinema through an accurate analysis of its forms and meanings. As he wrote in the preface to his controversial milestone of Japanese film studies, «my reading of the films is conducted, moreover, with constant reference to the history of 'Japanese Culture' as a whole. For it is beyond doubt that Japan's singular history, informed by a unique combination of forces and circumstances, has produced a cinema which is *in essence* unlike that of any other nation» (Burch 1979: 11).

In the following pages, without any intention of celebrating the unicity of contemporary Japanese cinema in support of whichever self-orientalist local ideology, I would like to delve into the matter and reflecting further on these quotations, and ask myself: how is contemporary Japanese cinema unique? If we want to find an answer to this question, maybe we should first establish whether a difference *does* exist and whether it is significant enough, both in quantitative and qualitative terms (in style, themes, essence…), to justify a break with the previous era of this national cinema. I believe the arrival of Japanese cinema in a completely digital phase is a distinguishing feature, as has already been pointed out by Canadian film scholar Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano (2012). Then, were we to query what characterizes this particular epoch's national cinema, the questions multiply: 1) does a specificity of Japanese cinema in the digital age exist *if compared to its analog season*? 2) does a specificity of Japanese cinema in the digital age exist *if compared to digital American cinema*, *digital Italian cinema*, *or digital Chinese cinema*? Underlying these questions is the ambition of exploring new frontiers, and of gauging the perimeter of our current image of Japanese Cinema (Calorio 2019), which is often fragmentary or anchored to the past. The ultimate goal is to acknowledge its form, to question it, and to exhort the reader to look beyond its borders.

Nevertheless, before trying to answer these questions we should step back and establish where contemporary Japanese cinema begins, assuming that we are

not already witnessing the birth of another new era, which would automatically make it *past*. We should also consider the intrinsic permeability between ages, of course. Either way, if we want to draw a definitive dividing line between the last chapter of Japanese cinema, and what has happened since, I feel we should concede the very first years of the 2000s, both the peak of what is considered the Nineties New Wave and transition period to a new era, and draw that line around 2004 (Mori 2006: 11).

2. After the Wave

It has been almost thirty years since the birth of what was hailed as the New Wave of the nineties or the fourth golden age of Japanese cinema (Schilling 1999; Tomasi and Spagnoletti 2001; Novielli 2001: 257-313; Richie 2005: 205-259; Mes and Sharp 2005; Dalla Gassa and Tomasi 2010: 195-237; Meale *et al.* 2010: 58-90; Bingham 2015) when a generation of producers, directors and screenwriters managed to revive a national cinema that was once an object of huge international prestige yet during the two previous decades had lost much of its allure. At the end of the eighties, the prizes obtained by Kurosawa Akira, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* veneration for the films directed by Mizoguchi Kenji and cinephiles' fondness for the *jidai-geki* of the fifties and the sixties seemed nothing but a distant memory. Conversely, worldwide declarations of love from film directors and scholars for Ozu Yasujirō's works (Stein and Di-Paolo 2015) increased year after year and strengthened a myth which persists to this day. Nevertheless, this equally sealed a sterile image of Japanese cinema, an illustrious but finite and unrepeatable chapter of world cinema history, a lukewarm fire barely enlivened by the last powerful sparks of the great survivors of the past, and therefore doomed to fade away with the likes of Kurosawa, Ōshima and Imamura. Not that Japanese cinema of the seventies and eighties lacked fine works, brilliant directors, previously unseen production ventures that harbored the seeds of what was to come, but Burch's «distant observers» saw little or nothing new coming from the land of the rising sun, and it seemed that the history of Japanese cinema had finally come to an end. As we know, things played out differently, because, as Alexander Zahlten highlights, the apocalyptic story of the end of Japanese cinema was doomed to end during the upcoming nineties (Zahlten 2017).

That being said, in retrospect, even the last golden age of Japanese cinema can now be considered long over. After reaching its peak at the turn of the millennium, its image abroad has since been fading. With few exceptions, in the following years, its leading exponents (such as Kitano Takeshi, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Miike Takashi and Sono Sion) failed to preserve the freshness of their beginnings, despite having earned a consistent presence in major festivals. Furthermore, emerging directors from the *Zero generation* (Mori 2006; Novielli and De Angelis 2016; Schilling 2019) were unable to replace their predecessors by developing a solid filmography that might otherwise have captured the imagination of a worldwide audience.

Nevertheless, if we set aside the image of Japanese cinema abroad and consider local production and distribution numbers, it should become immediately obvious that the fourth golden age provided an impulse whose effects last to this day. This allowed Japanese cinema of the 2000s and 2010s to settle on a respectable average annual production with a large presence of genre cinema, about thirty or more already established directors[1] and a number of promising and noteworthy newcomers[2]. Actually, the number of domestic Japanese films distributed did not revert to the disastrous levels of 1991 – compared to the relatively high standards of Japanese cinema history – when just 231 Japanese films were produced: throughout the last two decades, an average of 430 Japanese films per year have been produced, with peaks of 615 and 613 in 2014 and 2018[3]. At the same time, Japanese cinema was able to take on a wide range of forms and genres aimed at different audiences. This gave birth to a considerable number of *auteurs* (both male and female, which previously had not been so obvious) who, despite the lumbering presence of mainstream cinema and the lack of sufficiently effective forms of government support (Gerow 2006), strove to realize their personal idea of cinema, at times conforming to the system, at others openly opposing it. It embraced avant-garde movements and directors who persevere on the path of tradition, masters and artisans of the past who stepped back into the limelight in their senior years, as well as a renewed interest in militant documentary. Above all, it has generated a flood of adaptations from novels, *manga*, *anime*¸ TV series and video games.

In addition to such a prosperous output, even if only in quantitative terms, and notwithstanding there having been alarming signals of homogenization (of productive models, of genres, ideological...) (Osanai 2011: 57-59) in the last decade, it is undeniable that the new millennium Japanese cinema has joined the international breeze of pluralism that was blowing in contemporary cinema. Such conformity occurred to a greater extent than in the past and certainly links Japanese cinema to the global scene as well as to other national cinemas: although not to all of them, nor to the same extent or in the same ways. Japanese cinema, therefore *does have* a uniqueness – if not absolute, at least related to a given time, because it is undeniable that certain facets may only be found *there*, in that par-

---

[1]   In addition to those already cited in this text, we could at least mention Hashiguchi Ryōsuke, Harada Masato, Hiroki Ryūichi, Ishii Katsuhito Ishii Takashi, Kitamura Ryūhei, Kobayashi Masahiro, Kumakiri Kazuyoshi, Manda Kunitoshi, Makoto Shinozaki, Nakamura Yoshihiro, Nakashima Tetsuya, Ōmori Tatsushi, Sakamoto Junji, Sabu, Satō Hisayasu, Toyoda Toshiaki, Wakamatsu Kōji, Yaguchi Shinobu, Yamada Yōji, Yukisada Isao and Zeze Takahisa.

[2]   For instance, Andō Momoko, Asato Mari, Fujita Yōsuke, Fukada Kōji, Hamaguchi Ryūsuke, Iguchi Nami, Imaizumi Rikiya, Imaoka Shinji, Ishii Yūya, Kazama Shiori, Kudō Kankurō, Lee Sang-Il, Matsui Daigo, Miki Satoshi, Mitani Kōki, Ninagawa Mika, Nishikawa Miwa, Mipo O, Okuhara Hiroshi, Okita Shūichi, Ōne Hitoshi, Sakamoto Ayumi, Satō Shinsuke, Seta Natsuki, Tanada Yuki, Tetsuya Mariko, Tsuta Teiichirō, Uchida Eiji, Yoshida Daihachi, Yoshida Keisuke, Watanabe Ryōhei.

[3]   MPPAJ (Motion Pictures Producers Association of Japan). Cfr. <http://www.eiren.org/statistics_e/index.html>.

ticular moment and in such number. Examples include: such a flourishing animation industry; a remarkable and varied annual production, especially given the country's size; culturally connoted genres which continue to exist like *jidai-geki*, *pinku eiga*, *kaijū* or *yakuza eiga*; glocal phenomena like J-Horror; forms of transmedia storytelling and intermedia translation which are very different in number, density and phenomenologic variations if compared to their coeval US and European contexts.

3. A Technological Question?

Most texts frequently cite economic, productive, cultural and social factors, among others concerning the single directors' poetic, as responsible for the rebirth, dissemination and ramification of Japanese cinema of the nineties. Additionally, there are several technology-related factors which merit consideration, in particular the advent of VHS (Mes 2018: 225) and VCD (Davis and Yeh 2004: 232). Nevertheless, in the same years that the fourth golden age flourished, a new device was rapidly taking up residence in people's homes, offices and production studios with even more substantial, endemic and structural effects: the personal computer. Once the prerogative of a select few, it soon became a mass-operated tool and it was succeeded by even more economic and user-friendly devices such as smartphones and tablets.

Bearing in mind the richness and the inner diversity that characterizes Japanese cinema production in recent decades, and equally avoiding any temptation to regard chronological coincidence exclusively in techno-deterministic terms, I believe it is safe to adopt the completion of the digital revolution as the turning point towards a new season, and then ask the following questions: what has the role of digital technology been and to what extent has it contributed towards this renewal process? Which have been its most striking manifestations, and how have they changed our idea of Japanese cinema? While acknowledging the necessity for a global contextualization and perspective, have such manifestations developed specific forms recognizable as being exclusively «Japanese»?

The relationship between Japanese cinema and digital technology has already been explored by Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano in her *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age* (Wada-Marciano 2012). This is a pioneering work, which from the outset presents itself as an unavoidable starting point and interlocutor for my discourse. It allows me to overlook some relevant topics already analyzed exhaustively by the author and focus on others that she chose to ignore or simply introduced as useful tips for further research (*Ibidem:* 133).

While examining Japanese cinema in the digital age, Wada-Marciano shapes her analysis on the flourishing debate concerning the features of transnationality and cultural neutrality that supposedly characterized Japanese media production at the beginning of the new millennium. Starting from Iwabuchi Kōichi's well-known theories on the role of Japanese popular culture and media in a global context 'decentered' towards the Asian area (Iwabuchi 2002), Wada-Marciano focuses her discourse on cinema alone. Nonetheless, she criticizes the deter-

minism with which the label of «transnational cinema» had been affixed to some expressions of Asian and Japanese contemporary cinema (pan-asian productions, films by Japanese directors set in other Asian countries and spoken in English, films about Koreans living in Japan, 'ethnic' cinema, *Lohas cinema*, and so on) (*Ibidem*: 105, 139).

Wada-Marciano chooses to articulate her own discourse beginning with the impact of IT on Japanese cinema and claims that the peculiarities of the cinematic phenomena examined are suited to analysis in purely national terms as well. This allowed, among other things, the larger scale emergence of phenomena that otherwise would be confined to the domestic context (i.e.: national and/or homemade). In particular, the Canadian scholar focuses on the global achievements of *J-Horror*, the birth of new forms of cinematic realism, the rise of a «personal» animation and the «palpable sense of transnational, fluidity in identities, and national boundaries» (*Ibidem:* 22) that characterizes some productions endowed with a previously unseen international or Asian 'fragrance'. The analysis of these topics effectively answers the two fundamental questions of Wada-Marciano's book. However, in this essay we are mostly concerned with the first one: «What has been the impact of digital production and distribution on cinema?» (*Ibidem:* 24).

It is certainly true, both in terms of density and phenomenological extension, that J-Horror's triumph abroad exemplifies most impressively the effects of the digital revolution on the worldwide diffusion of Japanese Cinema. It is equally true that the lower costs, immediacy of use and technological convergence (Jenkins 2008) have also changed Japanese cinema from within. These factors provided successful directors with new opportunities for experimentation and propelled aspiring directors like Shinkai Makoto from creating 'homemade' works on their personal computers to reaching international acclaim; alternatively, they gave rise to a rediscovery of realism through films that ponder the reality coefficient inherent in contemporary images, as well as the boundary between testimony and fiction, whilst expressing a new quest for authenticity «constructed in the process of viewing, particularly in the scale and close proximity of the viewer's everyday life» (*Ibidem:* 53). This «DV-Realism» (Manovich 2002b: 212) is principally characterized by immediacy, a realism that implies an act of testimonial presence also in terms of proxemics, in response to the anonymous levity of digital society's images, in which the relation between image and reality becomes increasingly weaker (Malavasi 2013: 77). In this respect, it is undeniable that the realistic approach mentioned by Wada-Marciano evokes highly relevant topics specific to the era of digital images, but the reader is left wondering whether the production of two of the three directors analyzed, Kawase Naomi and Koreeda Hirokazu, may be considered truly representative of Japanese cinema in the digital age, excluding their evident influence on the following generation of directors. In actual fact, the portion of their filmography which is most characterized by a direct relation with reality occurred between the eighties and the nineties, in a media environment that was still *heavily* analog. Indeed, Yutaka Tsuchiya, the third director mentioned in the chapter, is a perfect example of a

film-maker who makes use of digital technology to comment on digital society in the two films analyzed in the book, *Atarashii kamisama* (*The New God*, 1999) and *Peep "TV" Show* (Id. 2003), and even more so in the following *Tariumu shōjo no dokusatsu nikki* (*GFP Bunny*, 2012). Conversely, Kawase shot her first 'I' movies (*watakushi eiga*) on 8mm film, while Koreeda's documentaries, recorded on video, may be considered auteurish TV productions. Besides, however relevant it may be, the realism of his approach in fictional cinema, which Wada-Marciano examines through a sequence of *Dare mo shiranai* (*Nobody Knows*, 2004), has become less radical and constant in his subsequent works. It should be also noted that, if some of the most representative film-makers of the last three decades (Dogma95, the Dardenne brothers, Jia Zhang-ke, Wang Bing, Lav Diaz, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Brillante Mendoza…) have expressed the tendency towards a rediscovered need for realism on a global scale, Japanese self-documentaries (Hisashi 2014) are unlikely to be included among the most original forms of contemporary realism. That said, we could perhaps take into consideration their diaristic, intimate and private dimension, which is easily identifiable with a far more ancient national literary tradition. In truth, even this aspect is not a unique case in the global cinema context, but it is significantly conspicuous to be criticized for its solipsism (Nornes 2007: 134-136).

4. Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age?

If on the basis of the doubts expressed in the previous section the idea of «Japanese cinema in the digital age» formulated by Wada-Marciano appears (albeit necessarily) arbitrary, it highlights a very important issue: that is, how difficult it is to give an exhaustive image of contemporary cinema for this prolific nation. Moreover, the absence of a significant chronological distance confounds such a task. Whilst every facet of the *J-Horror* episode is assiduously analyzed by the author, the remaining chapters focus on a few phenomena. They cite three or four important directors, as well as films or sequences. Nevertheless, is it really possible to understand such a huge production (previously we mentioned an average of four hundred films from 2000 to 2018) in reference to a handful of sometimes minor cases? It is certainly true that the films cited in the text, like many others, belong to the permeable and interconnected contemporary Asian and global context, to the extent that they would have been inconceivable, in such numbers, in the cohesive and almost asphyxial cinema landscape of the previous years. I am not convinced, however, that they can equally be numbered among the most representative films of contemporary Japanese cinema. There is no doubt that they exemplify the contribution of IT and their ubiquitous features in the redefinition of cultural geographies. Nonetheless, is this peculiarity sufficient to justify the centrality of such films to the exclusion of others from the book? Moreover, if we consider the 'digital age' label a mere synonym of contemporaneity, and in so doing move away from the goals of Wada-Marciano's investigation: is it possible to affirm that Japanese cinema today *is* simply that? Personally, I believe that such an interpretation of contemporary Japanese cin-

ema is overtly restricted. For instance, if we cast a glance over the entire land-scape and consider the essence of Japanese cinema in the digital age, we are left wondering what happened to contemporary Japanese blockbusters.

We shall now return to the time we chose as the starting point of contempo-raneity, and take as our example *Kyashan* (Id. 2004) by Kiriya Kazuaki. Like any modern science fiction film, this exemplar has incurred a heavy debt with CGI. How was its aesthetics influenced by computer graphics, then, if compared to Hollywood superhero movies? Moreover, *Kyashan* is the *live action* adaptation of a well-known animated series from the seventies, and as the very phenom-enon of the cinematic translations of *manga* and *anime*, it may be considered one of the most representative manifestations of Japanese cinema in the 2000s (Novielli 2011; Joo *et al.* 2013a, 2013b; Calorio 2014, 2019; Mori *et al.* 2017). In my opinion, the peculiarities that these films manifest compared to the co-eval US *cinecomics* ensures that they are worthy of analysis. To quote Federico Zecca, «the cinematic translation of comics has provided cinema with an im-portant field of implementation to experiment the new potentialities of digital technology in relation to the creation of previously unknown models of 'real-ity' and film experience» (Zecca 2013: 51), and among all the films produced in Japan between 2000 and 2016, 8% are *manga* adaptations (Mori *et al.* 2017: 39). However, what might seem a meagre percentage implies that on an aver-age of 430, there were at least fifteen comic-inspired Japanese films in 2002 and 2003; this number reached a peak of fifty-three comic adaptations in 2014. The increasingly frequent recourse to the 'production committee' (*seisaku iinkai*) system has been crucial in this sense. Of course, the function of these ephem-eral clusters of fields related to the cultural and entertainment industry, which temporarily gather around a plot or a character, may be seen to resemble that of the American media conglomerates. That being said, there are significant dif-ferences (Joo *et al.* 2013a, 2013b; Steinberg 2018: 256). In the context of Japa-nese media studies, such forms of production which rely on parallel sectors to reduce costs and maximize profits are usually labelled as «media-mix» (Ōtsuka 2010, 99-119; Steinberg 2012; Perez 2017 and 2019). Their extension to the cin-ema sector played a vital role in molding (and homogenizing) the identity and image of contemporary Japanese cinema (Yomota 2019 [2014]: 189). Neverthe-less, the discourse surrounding the collaborative work ethic of cinema, *manga* and digital technology (the latter being, «a formidable instrument of improve-ment and expansion of the intermedia geography of cinema», Zecca 2013: 51) in an age when the manipulation of images has almost transformed cinema into a «sub-genre of painting» (Manovich 2002a: 295), does not solely concern the acquisition of narrative contents. This also affects the intensification of the se-miological interferences (Zecca 2013: 234) between the two media on a visual level, which was fostered by their conversion to a single language and 'matter': binary code. However far-reaching this phenomenon may be, its significance has been relatively overlooked in the field of Japanese cinema studies, even though it stands out for its sheer magnitude and consequently, in my opinion, ranks highly among the many examples of Japanese cinema in the digital age.

Moreover, the impact of CGI, with its facilitative capacity to transform science fiction blockbusters and *cinemanga*, can also be seen in other genres' peculiar, deviant, or even counter-current use of computer graphics. We might consider, for instance, the brilliant intrusions made by TV comedian Matsumoto Hitoshi in the realm of cinema, the almost boastful low-budget and lo-fi grotesque body horrors by directors like Iguchi Noboru, Nishimura Yoshihiro e Yamaguchi Yūdai, or small, invisible and practically homemade films like *Tennensei shinryaku to mozō ai* (*FIX*, 2005) by Yamaoka Nobutaka. In some notable cases, e.g. Ishii Katsuhito's *Cha no aji* (*The Taste of Tea*, 2004) or Matsumoto's *Symbol* (Id. 2009), computer graphics are exploited differently to create fluid, dreamlike or surreal atmospheres. This approach contrasts markedly with fantasy and science-fiction cinema whose use of CGI is aimed at pursuing «the mimesis of our own imagination» (Belting 2005: 309) through a photorealistic aesthetic.

In returning to cinematic realism, we might question the pertinence of the forms of digital realism and documentary which have emerged in the eight years since the publication of Wada-Marciano's 2012 book. We could cite the films by Tomita Katsuya (Sharp 2013), or the many post-Fukushima documentaries, in particular of *Mujin chitai* (*No Man's Zone*, 2011) by Fujiwara Toshifumi (Bingham 2015: 144-170; Boscarol 2014). Other noteworthy examples include: self-documentaries such as *Mainichi ga arutsuhaimaa* (*Mainichi Alzheimer*, 2012) by Sekiguchi Yuka, which instead of a realistic approach, choose a distinctly intermedia attitude; documentarists like Sōda Kazuhiro, whose career and approach followed a different path compared to what characterized the phenomenon of self-produced documentaries, and yet whose works may be considered more representative of a conscious and original use of digital (Gray 2007) than many others. We might further consider the affect a DV camera bears on photography and sound in a work like *Aragane* by Oda Kaori (Id. 2015); certain films' deformation of the realism of proximity and testimony into the grotesque appearance of a reality show, as evidenced in *Koi no uzu* (*Be My Baby*, 2014) by Ōne Hitoshi; or those who, to an even greater extent than Kawase's, query the boundaries between reality and fiction in the digital age further still, e.g. *Kaihō-ku* (*Fragile*, 2014) by Ōta Shingo. Looking back on the previous decade but continuing to address the issue of the ambiguity between testimony and fiction often underlined by these forms of DV realism when they are used as an aesthetical option in all their poverty and immediacy: have the peculiar Japanese declinations of contemporary phenomena like mockumentaries, fake found footage films or media collages, not produced cases worthy of study, both in the field of horror cinema (Shiraishi Kōji has made this his trademark since 2005) and comedy (among the most noteworthy we might mention Yamashita Nobuhiro's and Matsumoto Hitoshi's hilarious mockumentaries in the same years)?

5. Deeper into the plural

At this point, great is the temptation to broaden our gaze. We might for instance include in our discourse the main exponents of experimental Japanese

cinema in the digital age like Makino Takashi, Goshima Kazuhiro, Shinkan Tamaki and Nishikawa Tomonari (Kiejziewicz 2016: 99-114). Moreover, the word 'digital' does not only imply opportunities to export films abroad (Iordanova 2010; Iordanova and Cunningham 2012), ease and immediacy of use, realistic aesthetics and CGI: another noteworthy interpretation might be *Riri shu-shu no subete* (*All About Lily Chou-Chou*, 2001) by Iwai Shunji. This project was born in a website's BBS, and subsequently evolved into CD-ROM, before achieving its highly intermedial cinematic forms (Locati 2016a, 2016b). A similar case is that of *Densha otoko* (*Train Man*, 2005) by Murakami Shōsuke. In this respect, an essay which explores Japanese cinema from such a perspective would be incomplete without mention of such films that establish transmedia and intermedia relationships with the digital culture on every imaginable level. The same applies (as for animation) for a director like Yuasa Masaaki, whose works resort to multifaceted forms of convergence (and divergence) (Steinberg 2018: 252-262), as is evident in *Mind Game* (2004) and *Tatami Galaxy* (2010). Other works by Yuasa, such as *Kaiba* (2008), unequivocally investigate, albeit through metaphor, the urgent themes of memory and identity in a digital society, while the late Kon Satoshi's turn of the century fluid and visionary style of animation seemed to recall the aesthetics of the digital itself, with some of the most disturbing portrayals of the post-media society. Regarding animation once more, it would be natural to consider the relationship between three-dimensional computer graphics and the persistence of a bidimensional aesthetics in Japanese anime (Sharp 2008: 120-133; Lamarre 2006: 161-188 and 2009: 26-44), and to mention the «Web-gen» of Japanese animation[4].

Without delving too deep into technical issues such as photography, light or sound and digital technology's influence thereof, we shall now turn our gaze on the grammar of cinema: how did a digital environment transform the way directors conceive their framings and edit them, in Japan? For example, would Matsue Tetsuaki's use of 3D in his spatial stratifications of documentary, videoclip and videoart in *FlashBack Memories 3D* (Id. 2013) not be a perfect example of Japanese cinema in the era of «deep remixability» (Manovich 2013: 49)? Equally fitting would be the adoption of a new «economy of the gaze» (Uva 2009: 75) in his previous work *Live Tape* (Id. 2009), which is structured in a single seventy-four-minute long take. Such virtuosity was made possible by digital recording which is not subject to the limits of duration that are physically intrinsic to celluloid, and can «intensify real time or reproduce it in its integrity» (*Ibidem*). Perhaps we could also allow ourselves a short digression into the category of films realized with phones or conceived to be seen through them, but I believe that it would be equally, if not more engaging to investigate the two-way influence of cinema and video games. Of course, in this respect, many video games

---

4 Cfr. *Storia dell'animazione digitale in Giappone e alcune caratteristiche fondamentali*, «FAR from Animation» 30 aprile 2017. <https://farfromanimation.com/2017/04/30/storia-dellanimazione-digitale-in-giappone-e-alcune-caratteristiche-fondamentali> (12/20).

have been adapted for the cinema screen, and the copious debts that video game aesthetics has incurred with cinema are obvious. However, on the other hand, there are also films that incorporate the primary structural and visual traits of video games, such as iterative and accumulative narrations, the peculiar use of «first person shot» (Eugeni 2012: 19-31) and «run and gun style» (Jullier 2011: 59-76). In this regard, as Japan is one of the top worldwide producers of video games, perhaps there are also peculiar cases worth researching (e.g. the so-called «machinima» phenomena).

If we extend our exploration in the fields of distribution and exhibition of films, we might research the impact that transition to digital projection has both on the many minitheaters that flood the Japanese capital, and on the independent productions they host. Alternatively, we might investigate the repercussions of download practices on film festivals, and on their relocation on the Web (practically an obligation in the year of coronavirus). Additionally, the recent distribution abroad of Netflix or Amazon productions which involved Japanese directors like Sono Sion, Hiroki Ryūichi, Ninagawa Mika and Miyake Shō, represents a novelty inherent in the recent digital mediascape. A similar investigation could be made into the presence of Japanese cinema on such international and national video-sharing platforms like Youtube, Vimeo and Niconico Dōga respectively. We might then mention Web-produced crowdfounding films, all films that today are viewable, downloadable and purchasable *only* thanks to the Web, films which are 'muxed', remixed, re-used by net surfers, and others that contain subtitles in foreign languages thanks to the work of the «connective» (De Kerkhove 1999) intelligence or the «networked publics» (Itō 2008: 3), or otherwise all the grassroots social and cultural practices (including, on an anything but the playful side, the organization of public projections by underground filmmakers and activists) (Fujiki 2015) that the digitization and the convergence of media, in synergy with the Web 2.0, facilitate and stimulate.

We could also invert our perspective and discover all those movies that witnessed, both in terms of content and visual, the digitization of society and identity. Either deliberately or symptomatically, these films expressed the feverish enthusiasms and the technophobic fears aroused by IT, while science fiction movies attempted to foresee future digital landscapes. Were we consider the cold, distant, «operative»[5] drone gaze of the mysterious aerial lens of *Tokyo Scanner* (Id. 2004), directed by Matsu Hiroaki under the supervision of Oshii Mamoru: would it not be a suitable metaphor for the diffused and minute surveillance of the so-called «digital panopticom» (Han 2012: VIII)?

In closing, if we acknowledge media's permeability in the digital age, and widen our gaze to consider cinema not only as «the films» but a «a modality of watching films» (Casetti 2015: 54) or, in the words of Manovich, a «visual esperanto» (Manovich 2002b: 87), a «cultural interface» (*Ibidem*) or a «toolbox» (*Ibidem:* 94) of contemporary visuality, then our perspective expands

---

[5]   The term refers to the definition of «operative Bilder» coined by film director Harun Farocki.

substantially. So, how is Japanese cinema placed in the post-media context (De Rosa 2013; Eugeni 2015)? Does it manifest cultural specificities in a globalized environment? Has there been anything new in recent years, concerning other audiovisual media closely related to cinema, such as *doramas*, web films, web series, video-art, commercials, Youtube videos and videoclips (let's think about those realized by Tsujikawa Koichirō for Cornelius, those that star the virtual *idol* Hatsune Miku, the 'Mikumentaries', the AMVs) (Itō 2012a: XVII; 2012b, 275-298)? Even live performances share something with this visual Esperanto, if we consider hologram-concerts of Hatsune Miku, or the animations included in the musicals 2.5D. Finally, so as to avoid any injustice towards less noble, yet closer, relatives of cinema: what could we say about the impact of digital recording technology and the Internet on Japanese pornography, its cataloguing and role as visual and lexical diffuser in the global supermarket of porn?

And so on. A seemingly infinite list of examples presents itself the moment one ponders the definition of digital cinema, even when remaining within the narrow boundaries of the Japanese case. Thus, we realize that *every* arbitrary definition, including Wada-Marciano's, is not sufficiently inclusive. And indeed, perhaps the plurality that characterizes the current Japanese cinema landscape, its flourishing polimorphism however unbalanced towards mainstream adaptations and shared by other national cinemas it may be, is the only aspect that can now define its being digital. As Francesco Casetti notes, today cinema is a «plural word» (Casetti 2006: 12), as well as an «expanding reality» (Casetti 2015: 111): plural is its experience (which may be both «filmic» or «cinematographic», *Ibidem*: 56) and plural are the ways we can read cinema's relation with digital technology.

Thus, we are dealing with a plurality of cinematic forms and aesthetics, of ways to create, look at, enjoy and rework cinema; and also, a plurality of formats, sizes and channels through which cinema can be drawn and disseminated. Perhaps we must simply acknowledge that it would almost be impossible, if not useless, to thoroughly embrace this cinema's heterogeneity. Although some individual cases have been actually subject to analysis, its multifarious manifestations would merit closer investigation. At this point, it seems pertinent to adopt a specific perspective, as Wada-Marciano did, indeed. For instance, we could consider which are the most visible images of Japanese cinema from the Web itself, and observe how they deviate from an elusive reality that defies any definition (Calorio 2019; 2020).

6. A Beautiful Star

Therefore, *what is* Japanese cinema today? To some extent, it is a national cinema that has some trouble equaling its ancient splendor. At the same time, however, it abounds with all manner of productions, whether big or small. It includes both films that rely on and establish fruitful relationships with other media, and conversely, films that strive to emerge outside the 'bubble' of this system. It is also a cinema in which we can find things you cannot see (yet or

anymore) anywhere else in the world. In short, it is a peculiar cinema, and for this reason alone I think it is still worthy of further research. Its features are not determined solely by the persistence of unique genres that marked the history and the identity of Japanese cinema, such as *jidai-geki*, *yakuza eiga* or *pinku eiga*. They are molded by the presence of new genres as well. These are more related to categories of *manga* – different and more diverse than those found in comics – than with the traditional shortlist of actual cinema genres. For the moment, such films give life to an almost unique phenomenon, especially because of the aesthetical and cultural specificity of Japanese comics themselves. Of course, Japanese cinema today is not simply this: it does not consist only of *cinemanga*, nor has it blended with J-Culture such that its medium identity, its autonomy and the density of its own experiential dimension are completely lost. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny the numerical importance and the intensity of this phenomenon, whose image, however cumbersome it may be, corresponds to something real, for better or worse. Likewise, I believe we cannot diminish Japanese cinema by claiming that very few of these movies stand out for their qualities, that *manga* is not the only medium cinema draws from, or that Japanese comics adaptations or films inspired by *manga* aesthetics already existed in the past. If we really want to discover a peculiar trait of this digital Japanese contemporaneity, I think today's cinematic representations of *manga* are where we must start. And by moving upstream, against the flow of intermedia loans and borrowings, we can uncover the origins of such traits. However, it would be wrong to assume that these peculiarities will forever be strictly associated with Japanese heritage. The permeability and global interconnectedness of every media system in today's society ensures that what may initially belong strictly to Japan soon disperses throughout the world, thereby losing much of its «cultural odor» (Iwabuchi 2002: 27-28). This is already happening. Indeed, it has already happened, and many times, and not only in Hollywood, nor in cinema alone (Napier 2007: 133, 137, 172, 211; Calorio 2019: 47).

While we try to find an answer to the question above, if answers do exist in this regard, perhaps we should also ask ourselves *how* Japanese cinema *appears* today. The answer may depend on our standpoint. For the seasoned festival-frequenting movie buff, cinema might appear rather stale and devoid of new *auteurs*. Seen from the Web, on the other hand, through digital platforms such as Netflix or Amazon, we can appreciate a broader landscape made of a plurality of different things. The image of Japanese Cinema that reaches the observers of the digital age runs along different avenues: both large highways and narrow trails. Therefore, in spite of the sheer mountain of works and the breadth available on the Web, some distortions arise. The landscape that emerges in front of our digital telescope is dotted with more sharpened and intense areas. Focusing on a specific objective (after all, a lens is the icon par excellence of all search engines), we can discover almost every conceivable phenomenon of the varied picture of contemporary Japanese cinema. While focusing on the big picture, however, only the most evident areas emerge. These correspond to the greatest, the densest and most populated niches of the Web. If an active search can

still lead to discovering something novel and unknown, it is exactly these areas, visible at a glance, that define the borders of the image of Japanese cinema that today reaches our distant screens: that is, above all, J-Horror and J-Culture-related hyperpop *cinemanga*.

The overall image of Japanese cinema today tells us two things. The first is that Japanese is by now a reflection of the past, the light of a distant supernova already extinguished although still visible. The second is that Japanese cinema is a star which still shines today not only by its own light: the stronger the bonds with other media belonging to that nebula named J-Culture are, the more we can see it. So, if the supernova has attracted sufficient admiration, and if we really want to understand what Japanese cinema is, perhaps we should take a closer look at this largely unexplored astral configuration, to analyze its *forms and meanings*. Even if the current era appears less golden than the time explored by Burch, and despite the suspicion, or the hope, that perhaps this star is already being replaced by a newer celestial body, as the twenties begin, further investigation would still be a worthwhile venture. In doing so, perhaps we will understand in which ways and to what extent J-Culture changed Japanese cinema, and not only Japanese cinema. Granted, this might complicate our task, but at the same time, it would make our effort even more worthwhile.

References

Belting Hans 2005, *Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology*, «Critical Inquiry» 31 (2 Winter): 302-319.

Bingham Adam 2015, *Contemporary Japanese Cinema Since* Hana-bi, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Boscarol Matteo 2014, *Asian Docs – Documentary in East and Southeast Asia*, <https://storiadocgiappone.wordpress.com> (08/20).

Burch Noël 1979, *To the Distant Observer – Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles.

Calorio Giacomo 2014, *Man/Ei-GA: intermedialità fumetto-cinema nel Giappone contemporaneo*, «Cinergie - Il cinema e le altre arti» 5, <https://cinergie.unibo.it/article/view/7059> (23/20).

Calorio Giacomo 2019, *To the Digital Observer*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine.

Calorio Giacomo 2020 (forthcoming), *Digital Japaneseness for Distant Observers*, in *Western Japaneseness. Aesthetic Transformations in Popular Media*, edited by Jacob Frank and Surace Bruno, Vernon Press, Wilmington-Malaga.

Casetti Francesco 2006, *Novi territori. Multiplex, Home Theater, canali tematici, peer to peer e la trasformazione dell'esperienza di visione cinematografica*, in *Terre incognite – Lo spettatore italiano e le nuove forme dell'esperienza di visione dei film*, edited by Casetti F. and Fanchi M., Carocci, Roma: 12.

Casetti Francesco 2015, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Dalla Gassa Marco and Tomasi Dario 2010, *Il cinema dell'Estremo Oriente – Cina, Corea del Sud, Giappone, Hong Kong, Taiwan, dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, Utet, Novara.

Davis Darren William and Yueh-yuh Yeh Emilie 2004, *VCD as Programmatic Technology: Japanese Television Drama in Hong Kong*, in *Feeling Asian Modernities – Transnational*

Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas, edited by Iwabuchi Kōichi, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong: 232.

De Kerkhove Derrick 1997, *Connected Intelligence – The Arrival of the Web Society*, Somerville House Books, Toronto.

De Rosa Miriam 2013, *Cinema e postmedia – I territori del filmico nel contemporaneo*, Postmedia Books, Milano.

Dorman Andrew 2016, *Paradoxical Japaneseness – Cultural Representation in 21st Century Japanese Cinema*, Palgrave MacMillan, London.

Eugeni Ruggero 2012, *First person shot. New Forms of Subjectivity between Cinema and Intermedia Networks*, «Anàlisi – Quaderns de comunicació i cultura», vol. 2, n. 2: 19-23.

Eugeni Ruggero 2015, *La condizione postmediale*, La Scuola, Milano.

Fujiki Hideaki 2015, *Networking Citizens through Film Screenings: Cinema and Media in Post-3/11 Social Movements*, in *Media Convergence in Japan*, edited by Galbraith W. *et al.*, Kinema Club, New Haven.

Gray Jason 2007, *Kazuhiro Soda*, «Midnight Eye» (July 1), <http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/kazuhiro-soda> (08/20).

Gerow Aaron 2006, *Recent Film Policy and the Fate of Film Criticism in Japan*, «Midnight Eye» (July 11), <http://www.midnighteye.com/features/recent-film-policy-and-the-fate-of-film-criticism-in-japan> (08/20).

Han Byung-chul 2012, *The Transparency Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Hisashi Nada 2014, *Self-documentary – Its Origin and the Present State. Yamagata International Film Festival – DocBox #26*, <http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/26/box26-2-e.html> (8/20).

Iordanova Dina *et al.* (edited by) 2010, *Cinema at the Periphery*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit.

Iordanova Dina and Cunningham Stuart (edited by) 2012, *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-line*, St. Andrews Film Studies, St. Andrews.

Itō Mizuko 2008, *Introduction to Networked Publics by Varnelis Kazys*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Itō Mizuko 2012a, *Introduction*, in *Fandom Unbound – Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, edited by Itō M., Okabe D., Tsuji I., Yale University Press, New Haven-London: xxvi.

Itō Mizuko 2012b, *"As Long as It's Not Linkin Park Z": Popularity, Distinction, and Status in the AMV Subculture, in Fandom Unbound – Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, edited by Itō M., Okabe D., Tsuji I., Yale University Press, New Haven-London: 275-298.

Iwabuchi Kōichi 2002, *Recentering Globalization – Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham-London.

Jenkins Henry 2008, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York.

Joo Woojeong *et al.* 2013a, *Manga to Movies Project Report 1 – Transmedia Japanese Franchising*, University of East Anglia/Arts & Humanity Research Council, Norwich.

Joo Woojeong *et al.* 2013b, *Manga to Movies Project Report 2 – Japan's manga, Anime and Film Industries*, University of East Anglia/Arts & Humanity Research Council, Norwich.

Jullier Laurence 2011, *Lo stile run and gun*, in *Corto circuito – Il cinema nell'era della convergenza*, edited by Fadda Michele, CLUEB Archetipolibri, Bologna: 59-76.

Kiejziewicz Agnieszka 2016, *The Technologies of Experimental Japanese Filmmakers in the Digital Era*, «Transmissions: the Journal of Film and Media Studies» 1 (1): 99-114.

Lamarre Thomas 2006, *The First Time as Farce: Digital Animation and the Repetition of Cinema*, in *Cinema-anime*, edited by Brown Stephen T., Palgrave MacMillan, New York: 161-188.

Lamarre Thomas 2009, *The Anime Machine– A Media Theory of Animation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Locati Stefano 2016a, *Nell'etere: All About Lily Chou-Chou tra transmedialità e nuovo statuto del cinema*, «Cinergie – Il cinema e le altre arti» 9: 128-139.

Locati Stefano 2016b, *Giovani inquieti. Gli universi narrativi di Murakami Ryū e Iwai Shunji tra letteratura e cinema*, «Elephant & Castle – Laboratorio dell'immaginario»15: 5-31.

Malavasi Luca 2013, *Realismo e tecnologia – Caratteri del cinema contemporaneo*, Kaplan, Torino.

Manovich Lev 2002a, *The Language of the New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Manovich Lev 2002b, *Old Media as New Media: Cinema*, in *The New Media Book*, edited by Harries Dan, British Film Institute, London: 209-218.

Manovich Lev 2013, *Software Takes Command*, Bloomsbury, New York.

Meale Raffaele *et al.* (edited by) 2010, *Nihon eiga – Storia del Cinema Giapponese dal 1970 al 2010*, CSF, Roma.

Mes Tom 2018, *V-Cinema – How Home Video Revitalized Japanese Film and Mystified Film Historians*, in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Freedman Alisa and Slade Toby, Routledge, London and New York: 216-226.

Mes Tom and Sharp Jasper 2005, *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley.

Mori Naoyuki 2006, *Nihon hatsu eiga zero sedai – Atarashii J-mūbii no yomikata*, Film Art, Tokyo.

Mori Naoyuki *et al.* 2017, *Manga + Eiga! Manga gensaku eiga no genzai-chi*, Yosensha, Tokyo.

Napier Susan J. 2007, *From Impressionism To Anime – Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Nornes Abe Marukus 2007, *Forest of Pressure – Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London.

Novielli M. Roberta 2001, *Storia del cinema giapponese*, Marsilio, Venezia.

Novielli M. Roberta 2011, *Il cinema giapponese nell'era multimediale*, in *Culture del Giappone contemporaneo*, edited by Casari M., Tunué, Latina: 135-142.

Novielli M. Roberta and De Angelis Eugenio (edited by) 2016, *J-Movie: il cinema giapponese dal 2005 al 2015*, Simple, Macerata.

Osanai Terutarō 2011, *Être indépendant au Japon*, «Cahiers du Cinéma» 667: 57-59.

Ōtsuka Eiji 2010, *World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative*, in *Mechademia* 5, edited by Lunning F., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London: 99-119.

Perez Manuel Hernandez 2017, *Manga, anime y videojuegos – Narrativa* cross-media *japonesa*, Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, Zaragoza.

Perez Manuel Hernandez 2019, *Japanese Media Cultures in Japan and Abroad: Transnational Consumption of Manga, Anime, and Media-Mixes*, MDPI, Basel.

Richie Donald 2005, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, Kodansha International, Tokyo-New York.

Schilling Mark 1999, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, Weatherhill, New York-Tokyo.

Schilling Mark 2019, *Art, Cult and Commerce: Japanese Cinema Since 2000*, Hawaii Press, Honolulu.

Sharp Jasper 2008, *Between Dimensions – 3D Computer Generated Animation in Anime*, in Id., *Ga-Netchū! – The Manga Anime Syndrome*, Deutsches Filminstitut, Frankfurt: 120-133.

Sharp Jasper 2013, *Katsuya Tomita & Toranosuke Aizawa*, «Midnight Eye» (February 06), <http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/katsuya-tomita-toranosuke-aizawa/> (08/20).

Stein Wain and DiPaolo Mark (edited by) 2015, *Ozu International – Essays On the Global Influences of a Japanese Auteur*, Bloomsbury, New York-London.

Steinberg Marc 2012, *Anime's Media Mix – Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis-London.

Steinberg Marc 2018, *Condensing the Media Mix: The Tatami Galaxy's Multiple Possible Worlds*, in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Freedman A. and Slade T., Routledge, London-New York: 252-261.

Tomasi Dario and Spagnoletti Giovanni (edited by) 2001, *Il cinema giapponese oggi*, Lindau, Torino.

Uva Christian 2009, *Impronte digitali – Il cinema e le sue immagini tra regime fotografico e tecnologia numerica*, Bulzoni, Roma.

Wada-Marciano Mitsuyo 2012, *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

Yomota Inuhiko 2019 [2014], *What is Japanese Cinema?*, translated by Philip Kaffen, Columbia University Press, New York.

Zahlten Alexander 2017, *The End of Japanese Cinema – Industrial Genres, National Times, and Media Ecologies*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Zecca Federico 2013, *Cinema e intermedialità – Modelli di traduzione*, Forum, Udine.