

Reviews, essays, and interviews on Japanese cinema, 2000–2019

Jennifer Coates

Reviewed title

**Art, Cult and Commerce:
Japanese Cinema Since
2000**

Mark Schilling. 2019.

New York and Tokyo: Awai Books
ISBN 9781937220099



Mark Schilling's *Art, Cult and Commerce: Japanese Cinema Since 2000* collects essays, reviews, and interviews previously published in the *Japan Times*, *Midnight Eye*, *Variety*, *Newsweek*, and *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, as well as the catalogue of the Udine Far East Film Festival, which Schilling advises. The volume is a continuation of Schilling's work in his previous collection, *Contemporary Japanese Film* (Weatherhill, 1999), marketed towards students, teachers, and the non-professional cinema enthusiast. While Schilling's 1999 collection introduced writing on Japanese cinema to mainstream audiences who may have struggled to access reviews elsewhere, we might question the utility of this follow-up volume in an era where much of the book's content is freely available in the online archives of the publications listed above. The impact of this volume today will therefore depend on how it is used by scholars, teachers, and students. I believe that this collection will prove a useful resource for research and teaching if we approach the volume as an historic document and as personal testimony, as much as a factual guide.

The relative ease of access to writing on Japanese cinema afforded by the Internet has also sped up scholarship and research publication since Schilling's earlier volume, meaning that it is easier to access published work on recent cinema today than in 1999. There is a significant and growing body of scholarly writing on Japanese cinema since 2000.¹ The triple disaster in Fukushima prefecture in March 2011 and its impact on filmmaking practices and

exhibition has, if anything, sped up the process of research and publishing on contemporary Japanese cinema. Against this background of scholarly activity, Schilling's 2019 collection will not make quite the impact of his earlier 1999 volume, at least for research purposes.

Yet the volume has much to recommend it. Firstly, and quite significantly, the book is an enjoyable reading experience. Schilling is an engaging writer, often very funny, and the accessible style will be attractive to non-specialist and student readers, as well as useful for teaching purposes. The volume is arranged in three parts, beginning with a series of short essays, a section of interviews with directors, film industry personnel, and stars, and a longer segment of Schilling's *Japan Times* film reviews organised chronologically. The closing pages show 'Best Ten' and 'Best Five' lists from 2000–2018. The hundreds of films discussed and reviewed include lesser-known and rarer movies, some still unavailable outside Japan, which will be of value to student readers and researchers.

It is unfortunate that typographical errors in the introduction and early sections sometimes risk misinterpretation of the useful industry information contained therein, for example, missing \$ marks and their designations (millions, thousands, etc.) make budgets and box office takings a matter of guess work in places. However, with updates on alternative

distribution formats and emerging screening platforms, as well as information about co-production arrangements between Japan and China, the new introduction makes a significant contribution to the volume.

More than 60 interviews with directors and stars contain priceless anecdotes that paint a colourful picture of the industry, though it may be difficult to prove some of the claims, allegations, and downright boasts therein. Schilling is a talented interviewer, drawing out highly original responses from interviewees. Some are hilarious, for example, director Nobuhiko Obayashi's anecdotes about learning the differences between American and British English during a bathroom visit in the United States (p.153). Others are more poignant, such as director Umetsugu Inoue's recollection of the tough times that star Misora Hibari suffered due to family problems and bullying in the mass media (p.81). The stories such Golden Age directors recount of their early years in the studio system are invaluable for their information about the informal networks of influence in the industry during its peak period of production and audience attendance (pp.77–8). Some of the Japanese cinema's most famous directors were interviewed towards the end of their lives, and Schilling often asks them to reflect on the changes the industry has undergone during their working years. Shindo Kaneto's observations about

aging and loss, and the affordances of cinema to express such complicated feelings, are particularly emotional (pp.46–7).

The majority of the interviews give the impression of reading along with a lively conversation, often based on years of acquaintance or friendship built over multiple professional encounters. When interviews don't go so well however, Schilling is a self-reflective interviewer, considering factors such as the environment of the interview and his performance of his own role to contextualise the reluctance of directors such as Masaaki Yuasa to engage in the extended responses more common to older industry professionals (p.219).

While the interview section is perhaps the most valuable part of the book, the preceding short essays also offer some reflections on the role of a film critic which may be useful for students and non-specialist readers interested in developing their own film criticism practices. An essay on screen violence gives an account of the overlapping concerns of film reviewing as a job, and the life and experiences of the film reviewer (p.27). In an interview in the *Japan Times*, Schilling cited critic Manny Faber to the effect that, "The critic doesn't watch the film, the man watched the film" (Alyssa I. Smith, 'Want to know Japanese cinema? Get to know Mark Schilling', *The Japan Times*, 18 January 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/01/18/books/want-know-japanese-cinema-get-know-mark-schilling>, accessed 1 October 2020). The experiences and mood of the critic colour their review of the film, and critics may be drawn to films that reflect or confirm something in their own experience. I would suggest that the book is best used with this observation kept in mind. In places, judgements can seem overly subjective – for example, the later films of Takashi Miike are dismissed as "less interesting" (p.14) without justification or analysis. However, Schilling is transparent about the fact that he writes as an individual engaging with the films he reviews as a person with particular preferences and experiences, and as long as the reader does not forget this, the book will prove informative as well as entertaining.

Jennifer Coates, University
of Sheffield, United Kingdom

Notes

- 1 For a full reference list, please see the online version of this review: <https://newbooks.asia/review/japanese-cinema-2000>.

Indian documentary film and filmmakers

Nadja-Christina Schneider

Reviewed title

**Indian Documentary
Film and Filmmakers.
Independence in Practice**

Shweta Kishore. 2018.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
ISBN 9781474433068



The struggles of independent critical filmmakers in India

In the summer of 2019, when the central government in India denied permission for 'veteran' documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan's latest film *Vivek* (Reason) (2018) to be screened at the renowned International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala, the organizers of the festival, together with Patwardhan, did what he often did when his earlier films faced state censorship. They took the battle to court, won the case, and finally got permission to screen the self-funded and searingly critical documentary at the festival in Thiruvananthapuram. Structured in eight parts, *Vivek* scrutinizes the mainstreaming of violent Hindutva ideology and majoritarian nationalism in India during the last decade. While the successful litigation in Kerala could be seen as a glimmer of hope for the continued possibility for audiences to engage with critical independent documentaries in India, the fact that *Vivek*, along with a number of other critically acclaimed films, was not screened at the 16th Mumbai International Film Festival in January this year (MIFF 2020) may not have come as a surprise for many.

MIFF was launched in 1990 as Bombay International Film Festival. It is the largest biennial film festival of non-feature films in South Asia, organized by the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. In the aftermath of the 2002 violence in the west Indian state of Gujarat, a censor requirement for Indian films at MIFF was introduced which, in turn, led to the

organization of the alternative Vikalp Film Festival in 2004 which ran parallel to it and where all the films rejected by the MIFF were screened (for a vivid account of the festival related politics, see Thomas Waugh's article 'Miffed! or "Gasping for [polluted?] air"', *BioScope* 3(1), 2012: 87–93). Thereafter, the censorship requirement at MIFF was withdrawn; of late, however, some notice a new form of indirect censorship vis-à-vis critical independent documentaries that simply do not get selected.

Not one, but many forms and practices

Instead of a universal understanding of the term 'independent', Shweta Kishore argues for a localized perspective that needs to be contextualized historically and spatially, and so her highly readable book starts with references to these two 'icons' of independent documentary filmmaking practices in India – Vikalp and Anand Patwardhan. It may be difficult to imagine another Vikalp Film Festival in the current situation, but it continues to exist as an important platform for "over 300 documentary filmmakers dispersed across India" (p.1) who communicate through the Vikalp Films for Freedom listserv. Yet, the coining of the term 'independent documentary film' dates back to the mid-1970s, when the Emergency declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi threatened the democratic political