

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
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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.

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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

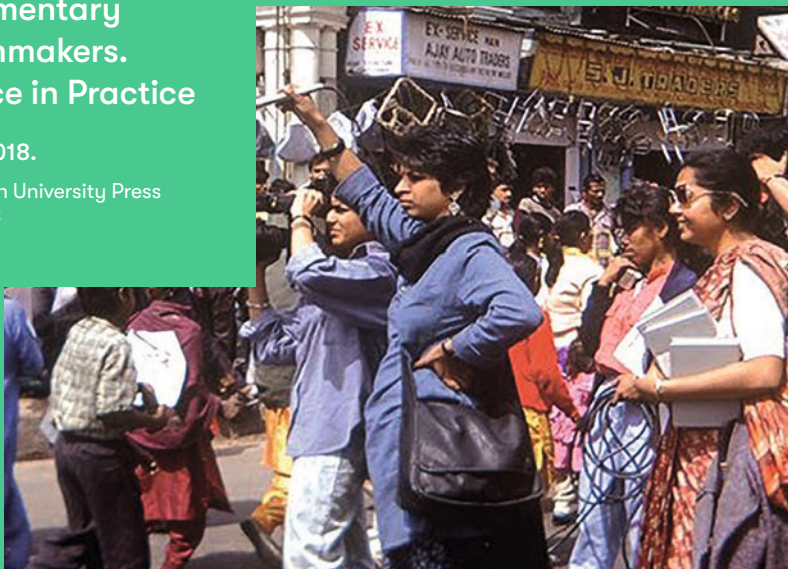
Nadja-Christina Schneider

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

Hayao Miyazaki

Exploring the early work of Japan's greatest animator

Mari Nakamura

Reviewed title

Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the Early Work of Japan's Greatest Animator

Raz Greenberg. 2018.

New York: Bloomsbury Academic
ISBN 9781501335945

Still from 'Spirited Away' (2001). Reproduced with permission. © Studio Ghibli.

Studio Ghibli, led by Hayao Miyazaki and the late Isao Takahata, is one of the most celebrated Japanese animation studios and has attracted a global audience for over 30 years. Many books and articles have been written in English about Studio Ghibli's works, including Susan Napier's *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke* (Palgrave, 2001), Helen McCarthy's *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (Stone Bridge Press, 1999), Thomas Lamarre's *Anime Machine* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), and Rayna Denison's edited volume *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess* (Bloomsbury, 2018). Yet until very recently, Miyazaki's early work has been less explored by scholars outside of Japan. A notable exception is Susan Napier's recent groundbreaking autobiography, *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art* (Yale University Press, 2018). Raz Greenberg's new book, *Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the Early Work of Japan's Greatest Animator*, is a welcome

volume filling this gap in the literature in English. In this book Greenberg aims to offer "Miyazaki in context" in its reflection of how Miyazaki grew within the emerging post-World War II Japanese animation industry and how his rise within the same industry is a very important part of his country becoming an animation superpower" (pp.xii-xiii).

The book showcases the richness of styles, narratives and themes in Miyazaki's works and how his creativity has evolved over the 50 years of his career. It starts by tracing Miyazaki's early life – his childhood dream of becoming a manga artist, his encounter with Tōei Animation's first featured animated film *Panda and the Magic Serpent* (1958) – and his early years as an animator at Tōei, the first large-scale animation studio in Japan, between 1963 and 1971. The first chapter examines many works that Miyazaki was involved in and the studio veterans he collaborated with, including Takahata,

foundations of the country. By means of "guerilla filmmaking on a borrowed Super 8 camera, improvised editing and underground exhibition" (p.2), Patwardhan developed his unique form and practice of political filmmaking. His 1975 film *Kraanti Ki Tarangein* (Waves of revolution) is paradigmatic for the conscious positioning of filmmaking practices outside the Films Division of India, i.e. the "nationally dominant state-run documentary production and distribution agency" (p.2).

Subsequently, the term 'independent' was for a long time primarily associated with politically conscious (if not activist, see Arvind Rajagopal and Paromita Vohra, On the aesthetics and ideology of the Indian documentary film: A conversation, *BioScope* 3(1), 2012: 7–20) and privately produced documentary films that were distributed and screened outside the organized structures of the state or commercial film theatres. But, as Kishore convincingly argues, the distinction between independent and 'mainstream' or 'commercial' productions has become increasingly blurred (under which category would, for instance, NGO-sponsored films be classified?) during the last four decades, and the same holds true for the diversification and blurring of genre boundaries. Accordingly, Kishore selected filmmakers for her study who reflect the contemporary diversity of individuals, position(alities), artistic forms and aesthetic practices of independent contemporary filmmaking in India: Rahul Roy (New Delhi),

Amudhan R.P. (Chennai), Paromita Vohra (Mumbai) and the filmmaking partners Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar (Mumbai). Monteiro and Jayasankar also co-authored a major contribution to the increasingly vibrant study of independent documentary filmmaking in India (*A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India*, SAGE, 2015).

However, instead of focusing primarily on the textual level of their films, Kishore explores the specific practices, relationships, techniques, and evolving structures that form around the independent mode of filmmaking of the directors in focus. All these aspects contribute to a changing notion and meaning of cultural production and the relation between visual culture, cultural producer, and society. Throughout the five chapters of her book, the author draws on a wide range of cultural, sociological and media theory and thus offers new perspectives on a field of research that for a long time had been under-theorized. Luckily, a number of important books and academic articles have begun to fill this gap since the last 10 years or so. Students and scholars who are interested in Indian documentary film studies or who wish to deepen their understanding of the multiple ways in which individuals continue to resist through an array of aesthetic and sociocultural practices will find this book very insightful and interesting to read.

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Yōichi Kotabe, Yasuji Mori, and Yasuo Ōtsuka. Greenberg also discusses how Miyazaki was profoundly influenced by Paul Grimault's *The Adventures of Mr. Wonderbird* (1952) and Lev Atamanov's *The Snow Queen* (1957) in terms of conceptual, visual, and narrative styles.

The second chapter examines Miyazaki's role in the animated adaptations of classic children's literature in the 1970s, including *Heidi*, *Girl of the Alps* (1974), *3,000 Leagues in Search of Mother* (1976), and *Anne of Green Gables* (1979) as well as the original short films *Panda! Go Panda!* (1972, 1973). Miyazaki's first trip abroad was an important source of inspiration, and his great love for the European landscapes were integrated into these shows. Linking these early television series and short films to Miyazaki's later films with Studio Ghibli, Greenberg argues that Miyazaki started practicing new forms of narratives, styles, and themes through these projects. The third chapter focuses on Miyazaki's directorial debut feature film *The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979) as well as the preceding animated television series *Lupin the Third* (1971, 1972), which are based on the popular action manga by Monkey Punch.

The fourth chapter offers a close study of Miyazaki's largest manga project, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1982–94), and the 1984 feature film adaptation he directed. This chapter examines how the world of *Nausicaa* was built upon a wide range of themes and tropes from Japanese and foreign literature and films. For example, *Nausicaa*'s character was inspired by the two literary classics *The Lady who loved Insect* from Heian Japan (794–1185) and Homer's *Odyssey*, while the post-apocalyptic world drew from American and British science fiction novels and films, including Brian Aldiss's *Hothouse* (1962), Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), and Douglas Trumbull's film *Silent Running* (1972). Greenberg suggests that Miyazaki's tendency to create strong female protagonists in his films can be traced to *Nausicaa*. Greenberg also finds a link between *Nausicaa* and the heroines of influential works such as *Panda and the Magic Serpent* and *The Snow Queen* as well as *Heidi* and *Anne*.

The fifth and sixth chapters explore Miyazaki's career as a feature-film director at Studio Ghibli: *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Porco Rosso* (1992), and later works *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), *Ponyo* (2008) and *The Wind Rises* (2013). Greenberg finds many affinities in stylistic and thematic elements between Ghibli productions and the works that Miyazaki was involved in before Ghibli, including strong female characters, rich background designs, and complex narratives that were inspired by Japanese

and foreign literature as well as Miyazaki's own life. Miyazaki's later works, most notably *Princess Mononoke*, however, depict far darker and pessimistic visions, and Greenberg suggests that his later works reflect the sociopolitical uncertainty of Japan in the 21st century.

Here I would like to offer three brief critiques of this fascinating study of Miyazaki's early work. First, although Greenberg emphasizes Miyazaki's role in the animated adaptations of classic children's literature in the 1970s and links them to his later directorial productions at Studio Ghibli, more compelling and nuanced discussion of the animation production of these shows is needed. Miyazaki did play a key role in these projects by being in charge of scene design and layout, but it was director Takahata's idea to approach film and animation in a more realistic way by depicting the protagonist's everyday life in *Heidi* and other series (*3,000 Leagues and Anne*), according to both Miyazaki's and Takahata's writings. Second, including more primary sources – most notably, publications by Takahata and Studio Ghibli's Producer Toshio Suzuki – would be fruitful for contextualizing Miyazaki's career and works. These publications by key members of Studio Ghibli and their perspectives give insight into the studio and its creative process. Third, as Greenberg acknowledges, Miyazaki's sources of inspiration are indeed wide-ranging across time and space, from literary classics to children's literature, from Western sci-fi to manga to animation, and from his childhood memories to adult experiences travelling in Japan and abroad. Yet, what is less discussed is another important source: scholarly work. For example, *Princess Mononoke* is described as a historical fantasy set in Muromachi Japan and Miyazaki's "own take on the famous *Beauty and the Beast* legend" (p.136), but perhaps it is much more than that if we consider how Miyazaki was influenced by the works of archeologist Eiichi Fujimori, botanist Sasuke Nakao, and historian Yoshihiko Amino for many years. *Princess Mononoke* can also be read as an alternative historical imagination beyond the 'national history', as a Japan and its people that Miyazaki rediscovered and rebuilt.

In short, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in Hayao Miyazaki and anime as well as animation studies and film studies. It is an accessible book that invites the reader into the worlds of Miyazaki and his sources of inspiration through the careful analysis of his works.

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