CHAPTER TWO

PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION, IDENTITY, AND GENDERED SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE CINEMA: THE LOOK AND THE VOICE

In this chapter, I will discuss the issue of gender as a factor in identity formation, and suggest that in the context of Japanese cinema, ‘gender’ is often understood as a device to maintain the privilege of masculinist hegemony. Of course, it is a platitude to say that often film serves as a reinforcement of attitudes towards power which ascribe to men the responsibility for public leadership and control. Cinema, although capable of critiquing this attitude toward gender and power, typically and historically in Japan and elsewhere reinforces it. In so doing, cinema also reinforces gender as a determinant of the range and types of choices available to an individual in the process of identity formation, by prescribing a set of choices as ‘appropriate’ or not based on sex. Thus cinema becomes complicit in the ‘crisis’ I am arguing exists in Japan by reinforcing a paradigmatic definition of ‘identity’ related intimately with gender, and resistant to the possibility of change. Doing away with gender as a determinant of the things an individual ‘can’ or ‘cannot’ do in a social context is a goal, I believe, of humanism in general and feminism in particular. Without imposing this as a goal to which Japan itself must strive, I will argue here that it is a goal to which some Japanese filmmakers do aspire. Their relative ability or lack thereof to imagine this goal in the context of their works becomes a mechanism for reading film and gender as interconnected in the process of identity. Those filmmakers who resist the status quo and offer an alternative vision—often literally created through the visuality of their films—stand as a contrast which illustrates the general condition of the Japanese film industry, and highlights its possible responsibility for potentially maintaining restrictive imaginations of gender roles in the wider social setting. This chapter is not about gender in Japan, per se, but rather about the presentation of gender and its relationship to identity—possible or impossible—based on cinema’s reflection or critique of social norms.
In order to demonstrate my point that Japanese filmmakers are often complicit in an implicit denial of female freedom in identity formation, I will structure this chapter around an example from a female director whose work stands in thematic and visual opposition to many ‘mainstream’ films. This director is Kawase Naomi. I will focus here on her film, *Sharasojyu* (*Shara*, 2003), which uses a distinct visual style and presents both male and female characters themselves distinct from many visions of masculinity and femininity in other films which I will discuss. Here, I will focus on Kawase’s thematic presentation of gender as a real but ultimately unimportant aspect of identity through the visuality of her work. Growing out from my discussion of this film, I will discuss several contrasting examples which resist female empowerment or autonomy, in order to demonstrate the part film plays in perpetuating a social attitude itself culpable in limiting individual growth and emancipation—in short, in limiting the process of an individual’s creation of his or her identity.

Although this chapter will focus on gender in cinema, I will not specifically address definitions of masculinity or the issue of masculine privilege. This issue is certainly vital, but in many ways the history of Japanese film is itself the history of “masculinist cinema.” As such, I prefer here to concentrate on Kawase as an example of a filmmaker able to offer a viable visuality opposed to a dominant or ‘mainstream’ one, and through her work approach other films which deal problematically with gender. For the reader interested by the discourse, works such as Kam Louie and Morris Low’s *Asian Masculinities: the Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2003) represent an excellent starting point for a discussion of some recent problematisations of ‘masculinity’ in Asia in general. Through the work of Kawase Naomi, however, this chapter will address the issue of a ‘masculine visuality’ as the historically dominant mode of visual representation to argue both with and against Mary Ann Doane and other feminist critics who see “the simple act of directing a camera toward a woman…[as] a terrorist act” (Doane, 1981: 22). I will propose here that while indeed Japanese film has accepted the dominance of the ‘male gaze’ and as a result has capitulated to a denial of female involvement in social power and identity, nonetheless cinema is capable of formulating a different ‘visual poetics’ based on equality and inclusion in the processes of power.

Further, *Sharasojyu* as a film presents a very interesting use of ‘voice’—that is, while one of the principle issues which I will explore in this