CHAPTER FIVE

TRAVELING TOWARD THE SELF IN JAPANESE FILM

The “road trip” is one of the stand-by tropes of cinemas from around the world. It is one of the simplest metaphorical devices for presenting a character in search of meaning—personal, familial, spiritual, social—for his or her life, and of course it presents the scriptwriter and director with many ‘easy’ opportunities for destabilising situations in which to put their characters. So common is this device that it is virtually a cliché to modern audiences—they expect the character or group of characters to emerge from their journey enlightened in ways at least important, at most profound. And fair enough: the road trip is indeed an accurate metaphor for the journey of life that brings us from a point of departure to a point of destination and (hopefully) teaches us something along the way. The road trip movie certainly has a valid place in a study of identity in film, and it also certainly has a valid and popular place in Japanese cinema. This place evolves from the function of travel in pre-modern Japanese literature where it existed as a source of inspiration for wandering poets who, through travel, were able to connect themselves with both tradition and a supporting, natural world. However, while travel still plays an important role in contemporary Japanese art, both its function and its site of situation for the modern traveller are different than for his/her premodern counterpart.

This chapter will explore the ways in which the two dimensions of travel—outer movement through space and inner movement through time, memory, and the self—cohere in contemporary Japanese cinema, proposing, after Graburn and other scholars (Graburn, 1989; Adler, 1989), that travel does indeed function as a multi-faceted secular ritual, here highlighting the process of identity-formation and self-discovery not situated, as in the works of pre-modern writers, in the natural world, but rather within the urban space of the modern, westernised Japan. I will first construct a context in which we will read several contemporary films; this context will consist of historical, literary precedents for the emergence of the ‘road trip’, in order to establish the transition in that style of film to emphasise the urban condition of modern Japan. From this initial contextualisation I will move to more recent cinematic
examples of the genre, including Yamada Yōji’s *Otoko wa tsurai yo* (*Torasan, Our Lovable Tramp*, 1969), the first part of a popular and enduring series of films centred on an inveterate vagabond. From here, I will explore two principal films, *Vibrator* (Hiroki Ryuichi, 2003), and *Drive* (Sabu, 2002), with mention of others such as *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, Kitano Takeshi, 1999), and *Tony Takitani* (Ichikawa Jun, 2004) along the way. This principal analysis will utilise both narratological and visual/semiotic methods, to examine ways in which directors have captured the complementing aspects of temporal, spatial, and psychological movement in works fundamentally concerned with the process of creation of self-identity, both to situate this self-identity within and to overcome the potentially alienating, modern, urban space. As I will demonstrate, the reality of Japan as fundamentally urban, at least in its imagination of itself, requires filmmakers to reconceptualise the issue of travel as an equally fundamentally urban enterprise. And yet, nonetheless, the function of travel as a component of ‘finding oneself’ remains of a type with pre-modern conceptualisations of this process.

Travel is certainly nothing new in the Japanese arts, from the earliest days of literary expression to the most contemporary notions of virtual travel in animated video games. It is no exaggeration to say that even an early work like the *Taketori monogatari*, the *Tales of a Bamboo Cutter*, from approximately 900 AD, is centrally concerned with travel, for after all its protagonist, the princess Kaguyahime, has travelled all the way from the moon in order to beguile her many earthly suitors before she returns there at the tale’s close. Many of the poems from Japan’s earliest poetic anthologies, the *Man’yōshū* (*Collection of 10,000 Leaves*, c. 759), *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Old and Recent Poems*, c. 920), and *Shin-kokinshū* (*New Collection of Old and Recent Poems*, c. 1205) too, are concerned with travel and the sorrow it brings to those who must leave and to those who must stay.

Travel has not always been conceived of as a source of heartbreak or danger, however—with the Japanese haikai poet, Bashō (1644–1694), travel becomes an art form in and of itself, a source of inspiration for the poet as well as a means of reconnecting the artist with the antecedent classics of Japanese art. This recuperative or redemptive view of travel is akin to the transformation in the attitude towards the sublime that occurred in European literature in the 19th century—a change that saw awe-inspiring nature shift from a source of terror to a source of aesthetic inspiration. It is an attitude towards travel which still resonates today—travel “is functionally and symbolically equivalent