Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano


Since the 1990s Japanese cinema has witnessed a rapid transformation from a historical studio-centric model to a ruptured landscape in which different modes of production, distribution and consumption are in complex interplay with the cinematic tradition as well as other forms of the Japanese media mix or so-called kontentsu, including animation and anime, games, manga, television and the internet. Amongst other sociocultural and political forces, these transformations are driven by two radical changes that have permeated audiovisual industries in Japan and elsewhere. The first is the swift penetration of digital technologies of production and exhibition, primarily the reorientation from 35mm film to digital shooting and projection formats, and the accompanying shift in home entertainment from VHS to DVD and Blu-Ray discs as well as download content. The second change is the increasing prevalence of transnational flows of capital and culture, which not only rewrites the industrial logic of how films are being conceived, produced, distributed and consumed, but posits challenges to the historically dominant discourse of national cinema that has permeated the studies of Japanese film as well.

Wada-Marciano’s Japanese cinema in the digital age situates itself at the crossroads of these two radical changes of transnationalization and, more importantly, the introduction of digital technologies. The book examines ‘the salient film genres or media networks – horror, documentary-style fiction, animation, transnational cinema, and ethnic cinema – which have particularly shown their affinity with this technological development’ (27). For Wada-Marciano, an academic originating in the discipline of film studies, the central questions are whether a transformed identity of digital-driven Japanese cinema exists, and how Japanese cinema comes to terms with the potentiality of creatively democratic effects of low-cost digital filmmaking. Issues such as the artistic and methodological challenges transnational casts, financing and exhibition pose to national cinema are similarly highlighted.

The book, divided into five chapters, examines in particular what kind of changes in filmic texts, narratives and genres have been instigated by digital technologies and new media formats in post 1990s Japanese cinema. It sets a keen textual focus on the works of recognized auteurs and independent filmmakers alike, including internationally known directors such as Hideo Nakata (The Ring), Hirokazu Kore-eda (Nobody Knows), Naomi Kawase (Birth/Mother), Yoichi Sai (Blood and Bones), animators like Mamoru Oshii (Amazing Lives of the Fast Food Grifters), Makoto Shinkai (Voices of A Distant Star) and
Koji Yamamura (*Mount Head*), and independent filmmakers such as Yutaka Tsuchiya (*The New God*). Each chapter focuses on a separate problematic such as the proliferation of J-horror regarding digital shooting and consumption formats; authenticity in digital documentary; the emergence of director-driven ‘personal’ animation; the balance between the national and the transnational within contemporary Japanese film texts as well as the position of ethnic filmmaking in Japanese domestic cinematic discourse. The author does so by presenting a short overview of the existing literature on the subject, followed by an analysis of complementary directors and filmic texts, occasionally framing the discussion with historical references or theoretical and sociocultural context.

The above-described format serves as the strongest advantage of Wada-Marciano’s work, providing a general yet informative overview for both the novice and the already established academic reader. It is particularly useful for those who might not yet be familiar with the works of independent filmmakers such as Makoto Shinkai or Yutaka Tsuchiya. Yet, the book also yields noticeable questions, specifically in regard to its theoretical framework and framing of terms and concepts related to the everyday practices within the Japanese film industry. Readers might also wonder about the applicability of certain academic references, such as the example of Nordic transnational cinema as an academic reference point in a context where studies on the transnationalization of the film industries in Japan and East-Asia are available in abundance.

Particularly discussable is Wada-Marciano’s position regarding the recently emerging transnational paradigm in film and production studies. In her introduction, the author sets out to investigate ‘the strategic rationale behind the transnational cinema in both the film industry and recent critical paradigms’ (2) by following Koichi Iwabuchi’s widely discussed notion of ‘decentralization and recentralization.’ Yet, for Wada-Marciano, transnational should be understood ‘as the negation of the national’ (3) – the central argument that drives the author’s concerns about the ‘the mismatch between the actual phenomena of transnational cultural flows and the overeagerness in the American-centered Anglophone academic realm for creating a new paradigm shift that accords with neoliberal conceptions of globalization’ (102). Elsewhere, the author is also concerned by how the transnational discourse ‘tends to prevent us from recognizing the significant contribution of the critical framework of national cinema, particularly the problematizing of film studies’ universalism’ (103).

While the relationship and debate between the national and transnational discourses in film studies is indeed complex and ongoing, the author has, not surprisingly, directed attention to the fact that the shift towards a transnational paradigm in both production and academic circles has emerged not only as a theoretical challenge to the well-established position of national cinema, but