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Does Film Theory Exist in Japan?

Satō Tadao

Translated by Joanne Bernardi

Here I consider the written works related to film by earlier critics and contemporaries and examine, one by one, those that are considered important. This includes criticism and essays by film critics, essays written by or conversations with directors, screenwriters, and others involved in film production, and discussions of film by writers, scholars, and intellectuals at large. My central concern here is the pursuit of film's artistic value, and accordingly, as related issues, the pursuit of its social and intellectual value. To the extent possible, I wish to examine only those written works concerning film theory. In Japan, unfortunately, very few individuals can be called film theorists. Imamura Taihei (1911-86) is about the only person who has consistently worked as a film theorist, writing several theoretical books on film. The philosopher of art Nakai Masakazu (1900-52) has many short essays that are aesthetic considerations of film, and they have received some notice, as opportunities to re-evaluate Nakai's work increased in recent years. Rather than a coherent theory of film, however, these were fragmented sketches for theories that could be imagined as eventually becoming a large, coherent system. Similarly, the art critic Itagaki Takao (1894-1966) and cultural critic Hasegawa Nyōzeikan (1875-1969) have written aesthetic or cultural theory books concerning film, but for each of these writers film is considered little more than a passing interest.

The physicist Terada Torahiko (1878-1935) was a skilled essayist, and he wrote many well-regarded miscellaneous articles on film. Other than that, there are theoretical and aesthetic books by film critics Nagae Michitarō (1905-84), Shimizu Hikaru (1903-61),¹ Ueno Kōzō (1908-81), Aikawa Haruki (1909-53), and Mitsui Tatsu (dates unknown).² These writers each have only one book, however, and in addition they are considered problematic among filmmakers and appear to have had little influence on their films. Instead, books by the film directors Itami Mansaku (1900-46) and Hani Susumu (b. 1928) are significant because they are popular among members of the film

community and have had some influence on their work. Generally speaking, however, Japanese film directors do not really like to write books. With the exception of Itami, who wrote numerous excellent critiques and essays in the early 1940s, it is only very recently that film directors actively began organizing their opinions for publication.

There is a chapter in *History of the Theory of Film* (Storia delle teorie del film, 1951), written by the Italian critic Guido Aristarco, titled “Italian Contributions.” It lists the names of many individuals and introduces their work, beginning with, among others, Ricciotto Canudo, Antonello Gerbi, Giacomo Debenedetti, Umberto Barbaro, and Luigi Chiarini. In Japan, there are some books on the history of film theory that are written by film critics, but they are entirely devoted to introducing the theories of foreign film critics like Léon Moussinac, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Béla Balázs, Paul Rotha, André Bazin, with hardly any mention of Japanese film theory.

Has there been no film theory worthy of discussion in Japan? Has Japanese film theory been that inadequate? If theoretical ability were so scarce, then how would it have been possible to continue making such excellent films? Even though foreign recognition came late, Japanese film had already reached the world’s highest level by 1920. Moreover, although there were ups and downs between years when many excellent films were made, and years when only a few superior films were made, there never has been a year since then in which no good films were made at all. Even in the midst of the worst conditions after the surrender in 1945, we had Kurosawa Akira’s *Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail* (Tora no o o fumu otokotachi, 1945).

It is hard to believe that such an artistic tradition of Japanese film could be sustained without theoretical inquiry. Even if there is the transmission of technical skill, it does not develop through simple intuition or practices alone. Then where do we find Japanese film theory? Perhaps the succinct words passed in casual conversation from a director’s mouth to the ear of an assistant director, or another member of the crew, have been of the greatest consequence to film theory. In a long-established studio, there are many special terms and aphorisms that only those on the film set can understand. For example, take an expression like “repeating a gag in three stages.” This is a convention in situation comedy in which once you use a gag, you must then use another gag based on it in the same film and end with a related joke for the punch line. Some studios use the convention in home drama in which the layout of a house is made clear within the first seven shots. Many of these traditions, however, are not written down in books. Occasionally, someone’s assertion of such a convention is put in writing. The actor Kawarasaki Chōjūrō’s following recollection of the director Yamanaka Sadao (1909-38) serves as an example:

“In the films of King Vidor and Lubitsch, hands are placed firmly in laps . . . like something you’d see in a textbook.” Yamanaka only talked like this when he was drunk. “The audience hates the camera moving up and down. You have to set a

standard with one fixed camera position. A full shot is full, a bust is a bust . . . this is important but there isn't a single line about it in Pudovkin's film theories." He drank more sake, and the clock strikes three. "One close up in a film is effective, two, half as much . . ." Yamanaka beams happily. "According to Ozu, you shouldn't have overlaps in film, you shouldn't layer images . . . he says fading in and out is bad too, images can't just disappear."

This is an excerpt from Kitagawa Fuyuhiko's *A Theory of Prosaic Cinema* (Sanbun eigaron, 1940),³ and the recollection is said to date back to when Yamanaka was making a spate of period film masterpieces starring Kawarasaki Chōjūrō's Zenshinza theater group.⁴

There was a time when, for people interested in film theory, Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's montage theory covered everything. That's why even when Yamanaka was drunk he brought up Pudovkin's name in conversation.

The popularity of montage theory in the 1930s is indeed astonishing. This was probably the result of thinking that since it was born in the country of the Soviet revolution, which had such a strong attraction for young intellectuals, it was radical and scientific at the same time.

The screenwriter Yoda Yoshikata (1909-91) has this to say about the popularity of montage theory in the early 1930s:

Soviet films like *Storm over Asia* (Potomok Chingis-khana, 1928) and *Turksib* (1929) were opening and translations of Pudovkin's and Eisenstein's books on montage theory were coming out, so when young people got together they were so excited arguing about it that they'd be pounding their fists on the table. Let me tell you an interesting story. There was this guy M in the screenwriting department. When I was working on Murata [Minoru]'s scripts *This Sun* (Kono taiyō, 1930) and *White Sister* (Shiroi ane, 1931), it was decided that Murata would make his first talkie *Shanghai* (1932), a story by Suimon Ōkichi starring Ōkōchi Denjirō. When I was about to start writing the script, M asked Murata to let him collaborate by saying that someone like me, with such a poor knowledge of film theory, couldn't do it. Even though the script reading was the next day and we hadn't written a single sentence, he grabbed Murata aside and started arguing about the dialectical structure of the script. In sum, the portrayal of a horse, because it is an animal, should be followed by an opposing element, something like a metal door, with the *aufheben* of animal and metal, like cloud or water, as the unifying element. It was just like a game of Twenty Questions, and went nowhere. I said that it was already one in the morning, and asked what we were going to do for the script reading tomorrow. I decided that in any case I would write something on my own. I worked until 9 the next morning and wrote a script that was 250 pages of 2000 characters. It took eight hours.⁵

Of course, this example is ridiculous to the extreme and it would be a mistake to think of the influence of montage as merely this kind of nonsense. But this example also makes it clear that in practice a smattering of knowledge about montage theory was only an obstacle to the work of making a film.

There are also directors like the masterful documentary director Kamei Fumio (1908-87), who tried to think of a Japanese version of montage theory and came up with ideas like *haikai* style montage. At any rate, despite the flamboyant popularity of montage theory, it did not have much actual influence on the development of Japanese film. Instead, as the filmmaker Yamanaka Sadao said when he talked about “a standard with one fixed camera position,” directors wanted a theory for such problems as how the camera should be positioned. For example, the director Kinoshita Keisuke (1912–98) says the following:

In *Yotsuya Ghost Story* (*Yotsuya kaidan*, 1965), I atypically shot everything from a high angle. That’s the perspective in Japanese scrolls, right? I wanted to give the impression of a Japanese style painting, so I shot everything, even close ups, from up high. My sole objective was a composition in which even the lines in the tatami mats would be shot diagonally. It’s really hard using high angle shots. Simply speaking, everything seems unnatural.

I said that I tried many different experiments in each of my films. *The Army* (*Rikugun*, 1944) is almost entirely [shot in the style of] “one-shot one-scene.” If I were to say which films I like, *The Army* would be one of three or four. I used a lot of moving pan shots to stage the impression of flipping through one Meiji period colored woodblock print after another. This was my objective in *The Army*. What is most important for a director is not reading the script and wondering how to stage each scene, but rather what style should be used to direct the film. It won’t do to have the style fall apart from one scene to the next.

[...]

I divided up *A Record of Youth* (*Shōnenki*, 1951) shot by shot, and had a formula for using close-up shots at important moments. [People think that] directing entails making decisions about whether to use a close up for an important line of dialogue, or whether to shoot a certain pose in close up. I wasn’t thinking of everything like that. I was thinking about how to decrease the use of close ups as much as possible.

For Kinoshita, the starting point for ideas in directing is not thinking about how to link each scene. Rather, first you decide how to set up a “standard with one fixed camera position” for the entire film. Next, you decide how to move the camera, or to not move it at all. Kinoshita writes:

As for technique, *Garden of Women* (*Onna no sono*, 1954) is a film of pans and tracking shots. In reaction to this, *Twenty-Four Eyes* (*Nijūshi no hitomi*, 1954) has

no pans or moving camera shots at all. With a moving camera and pans characters will remain on screen no matter where they go. If the composition breaks down, all you need to do is move the camera; it's the easiest way to direct. But if you move the camera around too much, you might end up getting dizzy.

Amongst all directors, Mizoguchi Kenji (1898-1956) created a remarkably inventive style in terms of camera position and camera movement. He talked about it in the following way during an interview with the film critic and screenwriter Kishi Matsuo. It was precisely when he was filming his masterly *The Life of Oharu* (Saikaku ichidai onna, 1952):

Kishi: This time too you use your typical one-shot one-scene style. When did you start filming that way? It becomes strikingly obvious sometime around *Sisters of the Gion* (Gion no kyōdai, 1936) . . .

Mizoguchi: Yes, although I've been shooting in that manner for some time, since I made *The Foreigner's Mistress* (Tōjin no Okichi, 1930), starring Umemura Yōko. At the time, old Ikenaga (Nikkatsu studio head Ikenaga Hirohisa) got angry with me. (Laughs)

Kishi: That's right. But when you made *Sisters of the Gion*, it was popular to leave the camera set up for a long shot and shoot "one-shot one scene," wasn't it? This was probably the influence of directors like King Vidor.

Mizoguchi: That's true, but in my case, the person who directly influenced me was my friend Naitō Kōjirō. He was the son of Professor Naitō Konan,⁶ and is probably still teaching at a school somewhere. He was studying psychology, and he was a real character. He was investigating whether you could express the sense of smell or the sense of touch in film. He bought an old Parvo camera and did various experiments. Do you know Oguri Yoshiji, who was working in the Nikkatsu art department? He was also part of the group. It was like if you push a key on some kind of keyboard, maybe an organ, a color would be projected together with the sound.

Kishi: Wasn't that the "clavilux," or something like that?"

Mizoguchi: Yes. Naitō was investigating that sort of thing, trying to analyze the relationship between sound and color. For example, the relationship between the sensation of seeing an image of a female nude and the feeling of stroking velvet, or whether a person watching a stationary object loses interest in five seconds. At any rate, he was studying strange things . . .

[...]

During the time we spent together, I started thinking about this and that idea, too. With a film, the "psychological weight" an audience feels is different whether you let the film keep rolling in a one-shot one-scene fashion, or cut it up into pieces and show it in a "shot, reverse shot" fashion. When you show short shots, cutting back and forth, you're bound to have some shots that don't work. It's a big mistake to think that shorter is better. It has little impact . . . so I started

studying the one-shot one-scene approach that I use now. But this approach has its own shortcomings . . . as you keep cranking the film without editing you tend to become careless, and your work easily falls apart.⁷

Anyone interested in film theory knows about Lev Kuleshov and Vsevolod Pudovkin's psychological experiments with montage.⁸ By joining a close up of an actor with a shot of food, they could make the close up reveal an expression of hunger, even though it was not shot in the context of food; or, they could create the impression of a tremendous explosion with a montage of a torch light and blank film frames, even though they couldn't achieve a huge effect from filming the ignition of actual explosives. Based on these experiments, they constructed the theory of montage: in film, joining shot A and shot B does not simply result in A plus B but rather in C, an image that is neither A nor B.

Yet Japanese scholars who enthusiastically studied the psychological research on film by foreign directors knew little about the psychological research that intrigued the major Japanese director. Mizoguchi was not a psychologist, but by using a novel psychological approach, he created a method of continuously shooting a scene with the camera set up for a full shot, and avoided cutting up the unity of the film by having the camera move around in an extremely fluid fashion. That is how Mizoguchi developed his extraordinary individual aesthetic. Nevertheless, Japanese film critics still thought this "one-shot one-scene" technique was old fashioned even though they had for some time praised Mizoguchi as a brilliant realist. This seems to have been the result of their judgment being based on such theories of montage and film rhythm.

The idea of cinematic rhythm was a film theory that fascinated some film scholars even before the popularity of montage theory. Its fundamental essence is attributed to French film critic Léon Moussinac's book *The Birth of Film* (*Naissance du cinema*, 1925). In Japan, the critic Iijima Tadashi wrote a short essay entitled "Cinematic Rhythm" (*Eiga no rizumu*) in June 1924,⁹ introducing an article that Moussinac had published the previous year in a French newspaper. Briefly, this is the opinion that film's value lies in its sense of rhythm and not in its story. Moussinac is quoted as having written, "Editing a film is none other than giving rhythm to film."

The theory of cinematic rhythm made it clear that what makes film's value different from that of theater is that in film, rhythm is created through editing. Rhythm theory gave film scholars confidence in cinema, and shortly thereafter montage theory was transmitted along with the overwhelming popularity of Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Montage theory emphasized the editing process—which film rhythm theory described as simply giving rhythm to film—as film's own unique method of ideological expression. It increased the confidence of film critics who up until then had easily felt a sense of inferiority toward literature, theater, and other arts.

Whether based on theories of cinematic rhythm or montage, this way of thinking that emphasized editing as what made film valuable as art and novel compared to other

arts, made it difficult to evaluate the films of Mizoguchi, which had little investment in editing's appeal. According to theories that focused on editing, works like Mizoguchi's— with a minimal number of shots and the predominance of single shots of unusually long duration— were not cinematic, but theatrical. Mizoguchi's camera moves very elaborately, so while his shots are of long duration, the continuously changing camera position and frame composition make his work distinctive. In this respect, Mizoguchi created images that were completely unlike theater. Nevertheless, his work was considered theatrical because of the minimal number of shots, making it easy to think of his work as going against the aesthetic progress of film. It was thought that Mizoguchi's propensity for making numerous films about the feudalistic, old-fashioned manners and ideology of the world of geisha and artists, shared much in common with his adherence to the old fashioned (?) aesthetic of the theater.

Mizoguchi's films could still move people however, even if they were regarded in this way. Since the mid-1930s, members of the Japanese film world and critics all agreed that he was a master. So everyone decided to think about Mizoguchi in this way: Mizoguchi is great because of the sincerity of his images, the consequence of his keen observation of people as a realist, his skill in directing actors, and the meticulous care he puts into preparing his sets and props. His camerawork was regarded as aesthetically beautiful, but it was also thought of as out of date because it resembled stage drama.

For Mizoguchi, however, his subject matter and his observations on human nature would not have been possible without his unique camerawork. It is precisely his camerawork that marks Mizoguchi's gesture as an auteur, his expression of compassion toward the characters in his works.

For example, in the last scene of *The Loyal Forty-Seven Ronin, Part Two* (Genroku Chūshingura kōhen, 1942), Kawarasaki Chōjūrō's character Ōishi Kuranosuke, beckoned by a voice calling his name, walks alone down the corridor of the daimyo's mansion toward the garden in order to commit *seppuku* (ritual suicide). The camera first tracks back on Ōishi, smiling faintly in his white burial clothes, keeping his full figure in view by moving in concert with the pace of his walk; after a moment, the camera cranes up about two or three meters. We now look down on a full shot of the garden of the daimyo mansion, where Ōishi will commit *seppuku*. There the samurai who will attend Ōishi's suicide sit ceremoniously in formal dress, as if arranged in geometric pattern. The camerawork shows that Ōishi will commit *seppuku*, that the place where *seppuku* will take place is a very beautiful garden, and that *seppuku* is being treated solemnly as a ceremonial ritual, but that is not all. If it were, there would be no need to accommodate everything in a continuous shot of long duration, from Ōishi walking, to the crane shot of the garden. What is important is that it seems as if our perspective, looking down on the ritual of death at the daimyo's mansion, is that of Ōishi's mind as he calmly walks toward death. By avenging his master, Ōishi redresses the injustice of arbitrary power. Accordingly, carrying out his sentence by committing suicide is a confirmation of the

welcome restoration of order. The orderly beauty of this view of the execution ground must be the image of Ōishi's welcoming that restoration and it must be photographed from the perspective of his conscience. That is why it is necessary that the camera, which had been slowly tracking on Ōishi in long shot, suddenly—as if it has become his surrogate—comes to look down on the place of execution. Naturally, it is also possible that the full shot of Ōishi's figure could be followed by a shot of the execution ground taken from Ōishi's eye level. In such cases it is conventional to cut up the shots and edit them together, because it is believed one can even more vividly symbolize the hero's mental state in an extraordinary situation. It imparts a sense of fear to the audience, as if they themselves are headed toward the place of execution. In this film, however, it is critical to have a crane shot looking down on the place of execution: Ōishi is already aware that his death is a ritual that is necessary to restore order, and he is looking at the meaning of his death from an objective point of view.

This can be better understood through a comparison with the camerawork in the execution scene in another of Mizoguchi's period films, *The Life of Oharu* (Saikaku ichidai onna, 1952). In *The Life of Oharu*, there is a scene in which the foot soldier played by Mifune Toshirō is beheaded on the execution grounds because he has fallen in love with Oharu, a female attendant of the imperial court. In this scene, the camera slowly follows the movement of the raised sword of the executioner in a slightly low-angled close up shot. This gives us the impression of Mizoguchi's eyes staring fixedly, in place of the foot soldier to be killed, at the person who kills him. The camerawork for the execution scene in which death restores a sense of order in *Forty-Seven Ronin* represents a stark contrast to that of the execution scene representing an unjust assault on humanity in *The Life of Oharu*: a high angle versus a low angle; a long shot versus a close up; a long mobile crane shot accompanied by a sense of liberation versus a sudden, suffocating pan shot with a camera in a fixed position.

Seen in this way, the camerawork in Mizoguchi's films reveals his attitude toward the drama that is unfolding, and shows his gestures and expressions as he relates the episode. Just as a masterly storyteller immerses listeners in the world of the story through skilled gestures and facial expressions, we enter into the narrative through Mizoguchi's unique camerawork. There, with only minimal value given to cutting and montage, the director's emotions and ideological consciousness are revealed primarily through the camerawork. Amidst the popularity of film theory that prioritized editing however, the unique aesthetic of Mizoguchi's work, mainly achieved through his camera work, was often criticized without any theoretical analysis or study as oppressively stage-like—despite being lyrically moving.

Japan's own film theory has been difficult to identify because Japan's film scholars have not made much of an effort to develop a theory based on the aesthetic analysis of Japan's outstanding films. The individuals who have written books on film theory in Japan have mainly authored translations introducing foreign film theory. It is not that

Japan has no original film theory. As I stated earlier, such an aesthetic tradition would not have been possible without its own film theory. Unfortunately, however, Japanese film theory remains disorganized, buried in the word-of-mouth training at production studios, in the short essays and written interviews of directors and screenwriters, and in the film reviews written by critics.

Mizoguchi says that through his acquaintance with psychologists, he conceived the idea of a relationship between the length of a shot and its emotional weight and came up with the method of filming one-shot one-scene. In a similar manner, great directors must have been conscious, to some extent, of their individual technique. They just did not write about it. Mizoguchi at least talked about it during conversations with film critics. Isn't it possible then for us to use those words as a key to elucidating the theory those words contain? In 1932 the director Itami Mansaku wrote the following:

Is there one film theoretician today that we can rely on with assurance? Is there one page of film theory that warrants our attention? It is all chaos.

With nothing we can trust, we must begin thinking about everything from the very beginning.¹⁰

Itami denounced the tendency of Japanese film critics and members of the film world to uncritically accept the theories of "illustrious foreigners" (*seiyō no erai hito*). He believed that the theories of "illustrious foreigners" were suspect, and concluded instead that theories should be accumulated based on one's experience and knowledge. We must now assess that accumulation fairly and learn from it.

Notes

This is a translation of "Nihon ni eiga riron wa atta ka," which is the introduction (pp. 7-21) to Satō Tadao's *Nihon eiga rironshi* (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1977). It has been annotated and slightly altered to become an autonomous piece. In this introductory chapter, Satō describes his objective in writing this book as an effort to piece together a history of the development of film theory in Japan.

1.

[Translator's Note]: Alternately rendered "Shimizu Ko."

2.

[Translator's Note]: Very little is known about this theorist, whose first name appears in citations as

both "Tatsu" and "Tōru." Mitsui died young, before publishing his first and only book, *Montāju ron to yuon eiga riron* (1933), which includes a forward by his father noting his passing and his dedication to research. Mitsui's father does not give the dates of his son's birth or death, but because some of the articles included in the book are dated 1933, he conceivably died at some point during that year. Thanks to Aaron Gerow for researching Mitsui's background.

3.

Kitagawa Fuyuhiko, *Sanbun eigaron* (Tokyo: Sakuhinsha, 1940), 151-52.

[Translator's Note]: Yamanaka Sadao (1909-38) was a director and screenwriter who was a close cohort (and drinking companion) of

Ozu Yasujiro during the 1930s. He pioneered a new direction in the period film genre, a style referred to as "*chonmage ga tsuketa gendai-geki*" (contemporary drama films with a samurai top-knot) because of the stylistic contemporaneity and social relevance of these films despite their period setting. His career was tragically brief, cut short by his death on the Manchurian front in 1937.

4.

[Translator's Note]: A still-existing theater troupe originally founded in 1931 by kabuki actors such as Kawarasaki Chōjūrō and Nakamura Kan'emon.

5.

Yoda Yoshikata, *Mizoguchi Kenji*

no hito to geijutsu (Tokyo: Eiga Geijutsusha, 1964), 39-40.

6.

[Translator's Note]: Naitō Konan (1866-1934) was a professor at Kyoto University renowned for his unique approach to the cultural history of Asia.

7.

Kishi Matsuo, "Gumon kentō dai ikkai: Mizoguchi Kenji no geijutsu," *Kinema junpō* (April 1952).

[Translator's Note]: Kishi Matsuo (1906-85) was a participant in the vanguard of Japanese film criticism in the early twentieth century and a member of the Proletarian Film League of Japan in the late 1920s. After directing one film in 1938 he was primarily active in the industry as a screenwriter. He continued to write about film and was a familiar presence at "roundtable" discussions

on Mizoguchi's work as well as other articles on the director published in such journals as *Kinema junpō* in the 1950s. His biographical study of prominent members of the film industry, *People in Japanese Film History 1* (Jinbutsu Nihon eiga shi; Audie Bock has previously translated this title as *Personalities: Japanese Film History 1* in her book *Japanese Film Directors*, 1977), includes a chapter on Mizoguchi that recaps much of this earlier material, including the references here to the origins of Mizoguchi's one-shot one-scene technique. See Kishi Matsuo, *Jinbutsu Nihon eiga shi* (Tokyo: Dabiddosha, 1970): 569-628.

8.

[Translator's Note]: Lev Kuleshov (1899-1970) and Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953) were both Soviet directors famous primarily in the

silent era. Kuleshov's famous "experiment" purportedly showed the effects of montage: that an image of a blank-faced actor combined with shots of various objects (food, etc.) produced meanings in the viewer (e.g., "He is hungry") that did not exist in the individual shots.

9.

[Translator's Note]: This seems to be Satō's error. According to Makino Mamoru's *Nihon eiga bunken soshi*, Iijima Tadashi published an article with this title in the August 1924 issue of *Eiga sekai*.

10.

Itami Mansaku, "Tenpo to iu koto ni tsuite," in *Itami Mansaku zenshū*, vol. 2, 3rd edition (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1982), 5-10. [Originally printed in *Eiga hyōron*, February 1933.]