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THE WAY OF THE (FEMALE) DIRECTOR

The Work of Tomoko Matsunashi
by Peter Rist



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The 9th Fantasia Film Festival has been and gone in Montreal, and once again, this year's edition was hugely successful with its predominantly young audiences. As a big fan of East Asian cinemas myself, I attended close to 30 screenings as usual, and as with last year's edition, I was struck by an increasing percentage of female (and Asian) audience members. In the past, a strike against the festival was that many of the films shown bordered on the misogynist, and this was reflected in its predominantly male audience occasionally getting "ugly" in cheering crimes against women. There has always been a place for female fans of anime (Japanese animation) at Fantasia, and with Mi-Jeong Lee as one of the three directors of Asian programming, and three other women being listed in the catalogue amongst their twelve "associate" programmers, the prospects look good for the future. [1] Indeed, this year, at least three of the Asian guests were women, including Sandy Kang, the Director of International Marketing for CJ Entertainment, who was representing nine of the Korean films at the festival and two Japanese film directors.



"Torico" came to Montreal to show her 28 minute digital film, MIGAKAGAMI (2004), which, for me, was clearly the best of the five films in the "Japanese Short Films" programme (although the audience picked the anime, KAKURENBO (2005) as the "best Asian short film"). MIGAKAGAMI was produced by Hiroki Yamaguchi, who came to Fantasia last year with his feature, Bottled Fool, and, as with that digital work, very good use is made here of a low budget, especially in terms of creating special effects. Like Jean Cocteau's masterpiece of surrealist film, ORPHÉE (1949), the protagonist of Torico's film, a young woman, Milco is drawn through a mirror which has turned into liquid. [2] Cleverly, here, the world on the other side moves in reverse, and when Milco tries to return to the normal state of things she is tricked into setting up a mirror opposite her own, which, in turn produces numerous replicants of herself. With creative flourishes such as this, the imaginative young director of MIGAKAGAMI will hopefully find the opportunity to direct feature films in the future.

While it is true that women often find it difficult to break into feature filmmaking everywhere in the world, it seems to me that Japan might be the most resistant of the major filmmaking nations in giving opportunities to women. There are examples of female directors to be found in the horror and "pink" genres of Japanese film, and in the independent sphere of documentary film, but only one Japanese woman has made a real breakthrough as a fiction feature film director on the international scene and that is Naomi Kawase (with SUZAKU, 1996, and SHARA, 2003). Perhaps Tomoko Matsunashi will be next. She had submitted a two-part film, BITCH MATILDA (1998/2005) to Fantasia this year which earned praise from Fantasia associate programmer Michiko Higuchi. But the festival was unable to secure or produce a subtitled version of this, so, as an alternative, Ms. Matsunashi sent a copy of her latest work, THE WAY OF THE DIRECTOR (2005) too late for it to be included in the catalogue. Festival director Pierre Corbeil liked this digital work as much as Michiko Higuchi, so they screened it in one of the TBA slots, and invited the director to visit Montreal. I was among the fortunate few to witness this screening in the company of Matsunashi dressed in the crazy costume of "Strawberry," a character who appears in a film-within-her-film.



THE WAY OF THE DIRECTOR is a comic, reflexive film about filmmaking in Japan. Unlike other North American and European films that I have seen that deal with this subject, Tomoko Matsunashi's is highly original in that it takes a feminist stance. Kitagawa, (played by Norio Manta) competes with Saito (Marie Machida) for awards at a film festival, which showcases the work of new directors. Kitagawa is convinced that he is a genius and is equally certain that his competitors are useless. He wins the top prize, and immediately an aspiring actress, Sakurako (played by the director) comes on to him. He assumes that she loves him and exploits her sexually and financially. When she finally tires of his abusiveness, he has to be reminded that he is living in her apartment, when he tries to kick her out! Much later, after he has become a porno movie director out of necessity he encounters Saito again. She had been supported in her career by Araki, the manager of a movie theatre, and gained some notoriety playing the character of "Strawberry," a "green" vigilante who kills people for mistreating strawberries. Saito, who still believes in Kitagawa's self-proclaimed talent travels with him across Japan's northernmost (and, hence, coldest) island, Hokkaido in the middle of winter. Caught in a blizzard, she dies and he eats her flesh in order to survive, but also succumbs to the elements eventually. At the end of the film, Yamamoto (Yoshiyoi Ito), who had become Kitagawa's friend through supporting his career in the porn industry, is able to exploit Kitagawa and Saito's documentary footage and make a highly successful film out of it.

The freshest aspect of THE WAY OF THE DIRECTOR is the honesty with which it depicts male/female relationships inside and outside the film industry. All of the male characters expect women to be subservient to them, and, up to a point, the women go along with this. One of the film's assumptions is that young men get into film as a way of contacting and controlling women, and, it seems to me that this is a universal fact of life which has often gone unrecognised in the West. The degree to which the Japanese male actors (especially Manta) are willing to humiliate themselves through exposing their machismo is both surprising and praiseworthy, as is the frankness of the sexuality throughout THE WAY OF THE DIRECTOR. To some extent, I am reminded here of the brilliant Hong Kong comedian/director Stephen Chow (Chiau Sing-Chi) best known in North America for SHAOLIN SOCCER (2002) and KUNG FU HUSTLE (2004), who goes further in his own sexual self-humiliation than any comparable Hollywood male star, but, Matsunashi brings a decidedly female perspective to sexuality in the film business. Perhaps the biggest surprise for me is in how openly and how often I laughed through the duration of the film. It is hilarious.

Tomoko Matsunashi was born in Hiroshima on April 14, 1971. She studied drama at Waseda University, and after graduating she formed an acting troupe, "Chikatento Robakun." After making two medium-length 8mm films, she has managed to direct five digital feature films in eight years, often working with her acting friends. She is a self-taught filmmaker and with THE WAY OF THE DIRECTOR she clearly demonstrates her command of the film medium, using a wide angle lens to exaggerate the hysterical performance of Norio Manta, a hand-held camera to mimic Kitagawa's documentary style and parodying the superhero action film with rapid editing and tacky special effects. She received the Special Jury Prize for her first film, TO BE OR NOT TO BE at the Yubari Fantastic Film festival in 1996, and in 1998 she was nominated for the New Director's Award of the Japan Directors' Guild for BITCH MATILDA (one of the many autobiographical incidents which inspired THE WAY OF THE DIRECTOR).



[3] In 2000, she made SABU, Good-bye to Their Youth, an earlier attempt at comically rendering young male personas from a woman's perspective. This film combines left-politics and science fiction to tell the tale of two male slackers/losers who drop out of a provincial high school and become pedlars for a kind of Communist princess. After a "Revolutionary World War" which virtually destroys the Earth, not only does Tokyo seem to return to normalcy, but also the pro/antagonists absurdly settle down to a boring domesticity. This film was shown in theatres in both Osaka and Tokyo and was invited to Lloyd Kaufman's Tromadance Film Festival. Her next feature, REPLICANT JOE (2002) displays higher production values and goes even further in shifting from normalcy to fantasy. Here the title character, Joe, transformed into a cyberpunk, black space-suited robot, extracts revenge on his adversaries, armed with a rocket launcher for an arm, a pathetically small, yet protruding white woollen penis which involuntarily fires a laser ray, and a nuclear self-destruct button.

Matsunashi continues to work as a professional actress in Japanese films and releases her own directorial efforts on DVD through her independent label, Chikatento Robakun. Although a serious film distributor like Women Make Movies in New York City is unlikely to pay attention to any director of tongue-in-cheek "B" movies, there is a distinct lack of genuinely funny, feminist films out there, and Tomoko Matsunashi's work, which is both distinctively Japanese and universal in appeal, deserves a look. No doubt, as an unpretentious, yet strangely weird genre filmmaker, she will be invited to show her work again next year at Fantasia, but I, for one, hope she gets other opportunities...

This is Peter's first written contribution to SYNOPTIQUE.

ENDNOTES

¹ The three "associate programmers" include the legendary Hiromi Aihara who, since the second or third year of the Fantasia festival has been centrally involved in bringing important Japanese independent and genre films to Montreal, including a number of world premieres. She is certainly one of the most significant people in developing Fantasia's world class reputation.

² The Japanese director claimed to not be aware of Cocteau's films. She is also not familiar with another experimental French narrative film, René Clair's first film, PARIS QUI DORT (1923) in which everyone and everything in Paris is frozen in time and place while someone walks the streets as apparently the only living being—not unlike the situation in MIGAKAGAMI.

³ At the question and answer session after the film, she claimed that the film's most negative character, Kitagawa was actually based on her ex-boy friend!!

Peter Rist is a Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University. He has written extensively on East Asian cinemas and recently (in June, 2005) he read papers at academic conferences in Beijing/Shanghai and Tokyo. He is awaiting the publication of four books for which he has written chapters on silent Chinese and Japanese cinema, as well as the work of King Hu and Johnnie To, and he is currently writing a book on South American Cinema.

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