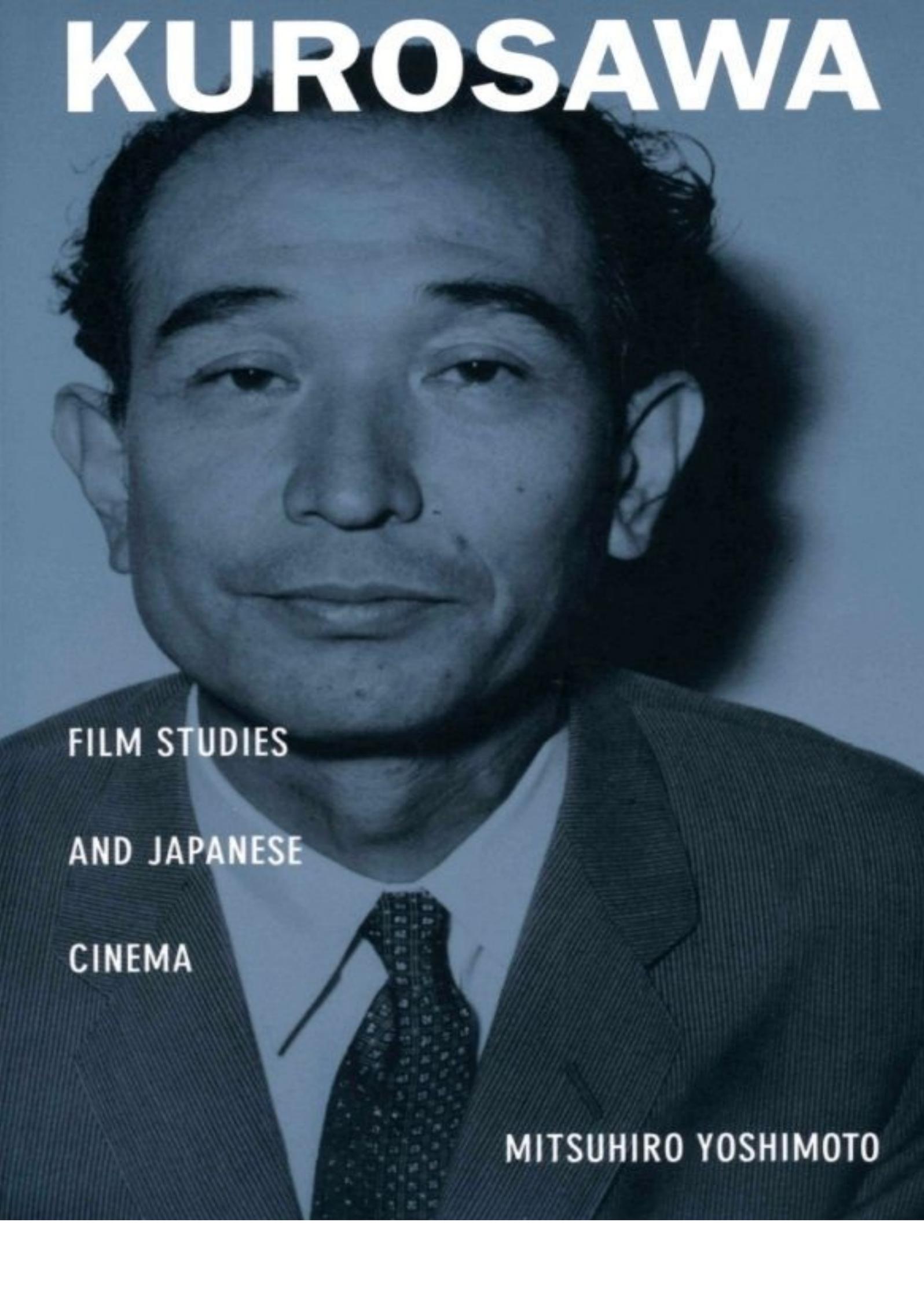


# KUROSAWA



FILM STUDIES

AND JAPANESE

CINEMA

MITSUHIRO YOSHIMOTO



# **KUROSAWA**

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## **ASIA-PACIFIC: CULTURE, POLITICS, AND SOCIETY**

Editors: Rey Chow, H. D. Harootunian, and Masao Miyoshi





*Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Kurosawa Akira secured his position as a representative Japanese film director in Japan and abroad when his *Rashomon* won a Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. Kurosawa is undoubtedly the most widely known and popular Japanese director — perhaps even the most famous Japanese — outside Japan.<sup>1</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kurosawa has been almost singularly responsible for the global recognition of Japanese cinema as a viable national cinema worth paying attention to.<sup>2</sup> Without the international success of Kurosawa, it would have taken much longer for Japanese cinema to achieve the status of a recognizable national cinema for the non-Japanese audience and academics. Because of the success of *Rashomon* abroad, the Japanese themselves realized the significance of the international film market. The worldwide acceptance of Kurosawa gave them an opportunity to rearticulate consciously what constituted the national and cultural specificity of Japanese cinema. Both in and outside of Japan, the imagining of Japanese cinema as a national cinema has been intricately intertwined with a critical reception and consumption of Kurosawa's films.

Despite his importance and popularity, however, if we examine the images of Kurosawa more closely, their clarity starts to dissipate. In fact, the position of Kurosawa in various critical discourse on Japanese cinema is even more problematic than that of such directors as Ozu, Mizoguchi, or Oshima. For instance, how Kurosawa is treated by Noel Burch, who reinvigorated an academic study of Japanese cinema in the late 1970s, is emblematic of a certain critical difficulty surrounding not only Kurosawa and his films but also Japanese cinema in general. Even though the prewar films of Mizoguchi and Ozu to a large extent have the greatest “use value” for Burch's avant-garde project, the pivotal figure for the project's overall coherence is neither Mizoguchi nor Ozu, but Kurosawa. Burch claims that “after Kinugasa, [Kurosawa] was only the second film-maker in the history of the Japanese film who, after thoroughly assimilating the Western mode of representation, went on to build upon it.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this Westernization of Kurosawa is counterbalanced by a diametrically opposite argument on Kurosawa's fundamental Japaneseness: “Kurosawa, despite the essential singularity of his undertaking, was nonetheless a late avatar of a tradition whose roots . . . are fundamentally Japanese, and even more fundamentally, *non-Western*, whatever the fruitfulness of the encounter with Western aesthetics.”<sup>4</sup> Yet in the end, Burch does not satisfactorily explain how these two contradictory images of Kurosawa can be reconciled.

Kurosawa's position as a filmmaker in Japan has not been secure and unambiguous, either. The Japanese images of Kurosawa are at least as complex and contradictory as the Western images. By many Japanese, Kurosawa is regarded as the most Westernized Japanese director. As a testimony to this view, we can point out that Kurosawa's name is often written in katakana, a type of Japanese syllabary usually used to write Japanese words of foreign origin. The non-Japaneseness of Kurosawa's image is reinforced by the adjective “world-famous,” which is commonly used with his name written in katakana: “*sekai no Kurosawa*.” At the same time, the Japanese media have invented a nickname that is antithetical to his de-Japanized image. Kurosawa is often referred to as *tenno*, “(Japanese) emperor,” for his allegedly authoritative behavior. Surprisingly, these two conflicting images are simultaneously present even in a single piece of criticism whose author is oblivious to an inherent contradiction of his or her argument.<sup>5</sup>

In both Japanese and Westerners' construction of images of Kurosawa as a film director, there is a

certain sense of anxiety, an apprehension about the validity of the critical concepts and frameworks they employ. I would argue that Kurosawa, who occupies a central position in the study, consumption and construction of Japanese cinema, arouses the feeling of anxiety in Japanese and Western critics because his films problematize Japan's self-image and the West's image of Japan. To the extent that his films reveal the existence of a geocultural fantasy in a seemingly neutral critical language of film criticism, "Kurosawa" can be understood as a symptom of Japanese cinema as it is perceived as a national cinema. A careful analysis of the films of Kurosawa and discourses surrounding his work will illuminate, among other things, the basic assumptions underlying the critical conceptualization of Japanese cinema as a national cinema. This book tries to reexamine widely circulating clichés about Kurosawa and his films not as nonsensical misconceptions but as discursive reactions to real sociocultural contradictions, institutional dilemmas, and disciplinary formation and constraints in the university.

Thus the choice of Kurosawa as the focus of this study is a strategic one. The book is not just intended for fans or aficionados of Kurosawa's "samurai films" or his gripping contemporary dramas with serious moral messages. Nor is it written for scholars in film studies or Japanese studies who are interested simply in learning more about Kurosawa's films. While it closely examines the specificity of Kurosawa's cinema, this study also tries to shift the basic ground on which the scholarship on Japanese cinema has been built and to problematize this scholarship's dominant interpretive frameworks. No matter how sophisticated it might be, a study of some particular critical or historical problem that can be easily appropriated as another fine addition to the field of Japanese cinema studies would not achieve my goals. The sheer accumulation of empirical evidence and new historical information would not by itself change the image of Japanese cinema exchanged and circulating on the academic market. This study of Kurosawa's cinema is based on the belief that one of the most effective ways to contest the axioms of a particular field of study or discipline is to take up a subject that is not necessarily new but already accepted as a canonical material. Given the central position he occupies in the reception of Japanese cinema, Kurosawa is a logical choice for an intense critical scrutiny and rethinking of the disciplinary formation and configuration of Japanese cinema scholarship.

But why does it have to be Kurosawa instead of equally — if not more, in certain respects — canonical filmmakers such as Mizoguchi and Ozu? There are practical and critical reasons for my avoidance of these two acclaimed filmmakers for this particular project. The most immediate problem with Mizoguchi is that so many of his films are either permanently lost or currently unavailable. As a result, a study of his cinema will be dictated not by our critical choice but by the arbitrariness of the material conditions. In the case of Ozu, it is precisely his canonical status that makes him a problematic choice of the type of critical project this study attempts to pursue. Since the late 1970s, more than any other Japanese director, including Kurosawa, Ozu has enjoyed an enormous popularity critically and perhaps to a limited extent also commercially. The celebration of Ozu's work and its central position in the discussion of Japanese cinema are attested by the numerous books on Ozu and his films published in the last two decades.<sup>6</sup> But new studies of Ozu have not changed the basic framework of the scholarship on Japanese cinema. Instead, they have either merely refashioned Ozu as a modernist or avant-garde auteur or reinforced Ozu's "Japaneseness" in the midst of the neo-nostalgia boom.<sup>7</sup> This prolific industry of Ozu criticism is closely connected to the institutional demands and specific cultural — "postmodern" — conditions of the 1980s; that is, the Ozu criticism since the 1980s tells us more about the cultural myths and social contradictions of postmodern Japan and global formation than about modernity and the Japaneseness of Ozu.

Part 1 of this study deals with large disciplinary and institutional questions. Its focus is the scholarship on Japanese cinema, which is thoroughly scrutinized as a symptomatic manifestation of

the current disciplinary crisis. This part critically reassesses three historical phases of the American study of Japanese cinema and contextualizes them in relation to the formation and institutional configuration of film studies as an academic discipline. It then examines how allied disciplines, specifically Japanese studies and comparative literature, have or have not constructed Japanese cinema as a legitimate object of institutionally sanctioned knowledge, and how the generally ephemeral status of Japanese cinema as an object of scholarship has been maintained by the disciplinary politics and institutional imperatives of academia.

Part 2 consists of thirty-one chapters of varying lengths, each of which, except the first, focuses on a specific Kurosawa film. The first chapter briefly goes over the question of auteurism and authorship and discusses the authorship of Kurosawa by using the notion of autobiographical pact. The rest of part 2 is not organized according to some common thematic or stylistic motifs, or a set of critical questions. I will try to simultaneously take into account the specificity of each film and the larger critical questions that cannot be confined within the boundary of any particular film. Ideally, all Kurosawa films should be analyzed as closely as possible; however, this is an impossible task because of the sheer limitation of space. I have to decide which films to discuss extensively and which ones to examine briefly. The amount of space allocated for the discussion of each film obviously reflects a value judgment on my part, although there is not always a direct correlation between the length of the chapter and the aesthetic and other kinds of value accorded to the film under discussion. Some films are discussed extensively not necessarily because of their intrinsic value but because of types of critical questions they raise with regard to Kurosawa's cinema and Japanese cinema in general. The uneven distribution of space is also due to my desire to avoid the repetition of the same argument as much as possible. Thus some chapters are quite short because critical issues which can be raised in relation to the films discussed in those chapters are more extensively treated in the analyses of other films.

I have decided to examine each Kurosawa film in a separate chapter because I do not wish to erase the specificity of each film by assimilating it into the putative grand "project" of Kurosawa as an author. The diversity, as much as the coherence, of Kurosawa's cinema will be emphasized. This does not mean, however, that part 2 is just a collection of textual readings of Kurosawa's films. The specificity of each film is certainly respected, but the larger critical issues that Kurosawa's cinema inevitably raises (although they have been left mostly untouched because of institutional constraint and disciplinary politics) are simultaneously explored. Kurosawa and his cinema are therefore defamiliarized as a way of coming to grips with the disciplinarity of film studies and, however limited it may be, as a first step toward the reinvention of a field of Japanese cinema studies.

Throughout the book, all Japanese names are given in Japanese order: the family name precedes the given name. When the person has published in English, the given name appears first. All translations from Japanese are mine unless otherwise noted.



# PART I

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## JAPANESE CINEMA IN SEARCH OF A DISCIPLINE

After having experienced two decades of rapid institutional expansion and consolidation, film studies is now facing a new challenge. The specificity and significance of film as a distinct object of scholarly investigation have been problematized by the emergence of new electronic and digital technologies. The current predicament of film studies is also a result of its institutional growth and development. Since the 1970s, the specificity of film studies has been determined largely by its focus on theory and radical interdisciplinarity. Yet when so many other humanities and social science departments claim a share of cultural studies and offer courses on critical theory, the boundaries between film studies and traditional disciplines are increasingly becoming blurred.

The purpose of this part is not, of course, to propose a large-scale solution to the disciplinary impasse of film studies. In what follows, I shall instead reexamine the scholarship on Japanese cinema as a symptomatic manifestation of the current disciplinary crisis. It is important to note that Japanese cinema was not simply added to the canon of film studies some time after the successful legitimation of film as an object of serious academic research; on the contrary, Japanese cinema played a significant role in the establishment of film studies as a discrete discipline. The position of Japanese cinema is inseparable from the question of how film studies has constituted itself, legitimated its existence, and maintained its institutional territoriality through a double process of inclusion and exclusion.

Very schematically, the history of American scholarship on Japanese cinema can be divided into three phases: (1) humanistic celebration of great auteurs and Japanese culture in the 1960s, (2) formalistic and Marxist celebration of Japanese cinema as an alternative to the classical Hollywood cinema in the 1970s, and (3) critical reexamination of the preceding approaches through the introduction of discourse of Otherness and cross-cultural analysis in the 1980s. Instead of being confined within the subfield of Japanese cinema, these stages were an integral part of the expansion and consolidation of film studies as a discrete discipline during the last three decades. To understand how Japanese cinema is constituted as an object of knowledge, it is not enough just to study scholarly books and articles on Japanese films. A critical reexamination of scholarship on Japanese cinema must be accompanied simultaneously by a reassessment of the larger discursive contexts of film studies and Japanese studies, which are constrained and regulated by specific disciplinary structures and rules.

How has Japanese cinema been constructed as a distinct object of knowledge in film studies? How has Japanese cinema been treated by Japan specialists? How has Japanese cinema been studied in the academic context of the United States? How can we study Japanese cinema differently? Is film studies the best institutional site where the research on Japanese cinema is conducted? If not, what discipline is better prepared for, or more congenial to, the study of Japanese cinema? What is necessary to make the scholarship on Japanese cinema more solid, reliable, or exciting? How can we structure the field of Japanese cinema to ensure its continuity and growth? These are some of the questions that the following discussion attempts to grapple with.



# Humanism and Essentialism in the Postwar Era

In the 1950s, it was mostly journalists and critics at large who published essays on Japanese films. Japanese cinema burst on the American film scene when Kurosawa's *Rashomon* was unexpectedly awarded a Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. This unique period film was extensively reviewed in the major newspapers and highbrow magazines, and its critical and commercial success aroused American curiosity in other Japanese films. Parallel to Hollywood depictions of Japanese life and culture in the 1950s,<sup>1</sup> many of these journalistic writings relied on stereotyped images of Japan confined to specific aspects of Japanese culture and social customs as the Japanese essence. For Hollywood and journalistic film criticism, Japan was often nothing more than a land of exoticism and alien culture.<sup>2</sup>

As Japanese cinema began to be treated as a distinct object of knowledge in the 1960s, the production of critical discourses on Japanese cinema was also transformed into a more specialized activity. The first significant text that contributed to this transformation was *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, by Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie, published in 1960. Intended for a serious yet general audience, *The Japanese Film* is a highly informative overview of Japanese film history combined with separate sections on major film directors and actors, generic types, and industrial structure. The publication of this book did not immediately engender the field of Japanese cinema in academia; however, over the years, Anderson and Richie's pioneering work has firmly established itself as the most basic reference book for film scholars conducting research on Japanese cinema.<sup>3</sup> In addition to *The Japanese Film*, Richie has published, as the most authoritative voice in the West and in Japan, numerous articles and books on Japanese cinema.

The 1960s discourse on Japanese cinema, exemplified by the works of Richie, is a type of humanist criticism, which sees film as a repository of universal values. The best films, humanists argue, can teach audiences, without overtly being didactic, important moral lessons regarding human dignity, freedom, and the unity of the human race. But these universal ideals are most effectively conveyed to audiences when they are represented through the concrete images of a particular nation, history, or culture. According to humanist criticism, what makes a film a great artistic achievement is therefore not the abstract presentation of the universal values but the complex interplay of the universal and the particular, in which the latter embodies the former.

One of the most enduring legacies of the 1960s humanist criticism on Japanese cinema is the use of "national character" as the particular, through which the humanistic ideals of universal significance are said to be represented concretely. This focus on national character as a determinate factor in analysis and interpretation has led to an unfortunate situation, in which stereotypes of the Japanese national character and cultural essence are routinely used to explain thematic motifs, formal features and contextual backgrounds of Japanese films. Thus, in American scholarship on Japanese cinema, the Japanese are often presented as the homogeneous, ahistorical collective essence called the "Japanese mind." ("To the Japanese mind, the self-sacrificing hero is the most admirable hero of all.")<sup>4</sup> It is argued that "Japanese culture and consciousness are marked by a valuing of the irrational," and this is why "one finds in Japanese culture a deeply embedded notion called *yugen*, which entails the presence of mystery and incomprehensibility in all things."<sup>5</sup> Many sweeping statements on Japanese culture are made without any consideration for its relationship to social practices and history. ("The Buddhist view of the world as transitory and full of pain has suffused the entire culture, inducing a sense of resignation in the presence of political brutality"; "Zen has infiltrated all aspects of Japanese culture, including the cinema"; "Although the codas [the uncharactered shots that begin and end most sequences of Ozu's films] have narrative significance, Ozu's privileging them over simply following

the action of the characters suggests an aesthetic attitude that places the individual as a mere element in the universe, the ‘void,’ rather than at the center, as in Western, Greco-Roman thought.”<sup>6</sup> Japanese films are said to be worth studying because of “what they reveal of the Japanese character.”<sup>7</sup> The ubiquitous presence in Japanese cinema of the traditional aesthetic is simply assumed without any critical analysis of that aesthetic. (“The black and white becomes an aesthetic device, which in this case reflects the Japanese ideal of *wabi* [poverty, the prizing of that which looks simple].”)<sup>8</sup>

It is of course not possible to determine precisely where this valorization of the Japanese national character came from. But two discursive systems from quite different areas, auteurism in film criticism and the legacy of the American military intelligence activity during and after World War II cannot be ignored. Japanese films’ appeal to the audiences in and outside of Japan led many critics to conclude that there was some kind of universal value in those films. While the exotic appeal of Japanese cultural specificity was acknowledged, the critical acclaim that certain Japanese films — particularly *gendaigeki*, or films set in contemporary Japan — earned at international film festivals was regarded as a living proof of Japanese cinema’s ability to go beyond the parochial context of Japanese society. The gap between universality and particularity was believed to be filled by “humanity,” which was posited as the most common denominator among diverse groups of people transcending national and cultural differences. And it was the role of auteurs to mediate the specificity of cultural tradition and the universality of films’ messages. Therefore, in the context of 1960s auteurism, the most important book on Japanese cinema was not Anderson and Richie’s *The Japanese Film* but Richie’s *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1965), since the latter was not only the first comprehensive study of the work of a Japanese film director but also one of the earliest examples of serious film books devoted to *any* auteur’s work.<sup>9</sup>

Auteurism has, according to Janet Staiger, three basic criteria to determine the value of filmmaker as auteurs: “transcendence of time and place, a personal vision of the world, and consistency and coherence of statement.” In their pursuit of “universality” and “endurance,” the auteurist critics find history transcended in the works of great filmmakers.<sup>10</sup> These basic characteristics of auteurism make it an ideal system of critical discourse that has created a space for Japanese cinema in American academia. Whether explicitly stated or not, the idea of the universality of shared humanity is indispensable for making Japanese films intelligible to the American audience. Because of the great auteurs’ putative ability to transcend the specificity of history and cultural context, the seemingly exotic films of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and other Japanese directors can easily be incorporated into a canon of the “world cinema.” However, to the extent that history and cultural tradition cannot but play a significant role in the formation of a “personal vision,” what is supposedly transcended sneaks back into the auteurs’ works. The humanist studies of Japanese cinema typically try to resolve this ambivalent relationship of the universal and the particular through recourse to Zen and the idea of religious transcendence.

One of the most revealing examples of the use of Zen is Paul Schrader’s study of Ozu in *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*.<sup>11</sup> Schrader argues that Ozu, Bresson, and to a lesser extent Dreyer created what he calls a “transcendental style,” which is a transcultural film form expressing the holy or the transcendent. For our purpose, the viability of the notion of transcendental style is not too important. We shall also refrain from exhaustively enumerating questionable points and obvious factual errors in Schrader’s description of Ozu’s career and films. Instead, what really concerns us here is Schrader’s precarious attempt to reconcile the universal and the particular in his discussion of Ozu’s transcendental style.

“To what extent was Ozu’s personality unique, and to what extent was it representative of the Zen culture? Did Ozu subjugate his personality in the manner of the traditional Orientalist artist, or were

his films actually highly individualistic expressions?" (24). According to Schrader, these auteurist questions are not relevant for the case of Ozu because "considered in the larger context of Zen culture, man and his surroundings are counterenveloping, just as are mind and body, content and form; any distinction between them is arbitrary" (25). Schrader eagerly tries to mold Ozu into a Zen artist of the East whose personality and culture are so steeped in Zen that his films express the Transcendent. Schrader's strategy is to create a holistic space called "Japan," which can be represented as a series of concentric circles: at the center of this space is located Ozu's personality, which is "enveloped by Zen culture, and that Zen culture [is] enveloped by a transcending reality" (24). Once homological relations are established between the author, the text, and the context, it is easy for Schrader to claim that Ozu's films express the Transcendent as Zen art does.

The particularity of Ozu's personality and the universality of the transcendental style are reconciled with each other through the mediating presence of Zen and the transcendental nature of Oriental art in general. In Schrader's argument, "Zen" and "Orient" are magic words that miraculously solve critical dilemmas and contradictions of his theory of auteurism. To assert that Ozu was a commercially successful director and at the same time an auteur of the transcendental style, that is, to reconcile the seemingly impossible combination of the popular and the esoteric, or the commercial and the aesthetic, Schrader appeals to what he perceives as a unique characteristic of Japanese culture. Schrader claims that what initially appears to be the unattainable goal of developing the transcendental style within the context of the commercial film industry is not in the end impossible to achieve because the "concept of transcendental experience is so intrinsic to Japanese (and Oriental) culture, that Ozu was able both to develop the transcendental style and to stay within the popular conventions of Japanese art" (17).

While making a culturalist claim on homology between Ozu's personality, films, and Japanese culture as manifestations of Zen, Schrader is at pains to minimize the role of culture in the formation of Ozu's transcendental style, since the transcendental style, "not determined by the film-makers' personalities, culture, politics, economics, or morality" (3), is by definition a transcultural form. There are two basic steps in Schrader's strategy for resolving this contradiction. First, he tries to discard anything that does not confirm the image of Ozu as a Zen artist. Schrader recognizes, for instance, how Ozu incorporated into his films the "rote repetition of movement [as] a gag in Japanese silent comedy" (37). However, immediately after acknowledging the significance of a non-Zen aspect of Ozu's films, he concludes that "taken as a whole Ozu's techniques are so similar to traditional Zen methods that the influence is unmistakable" (38). What is ambiguous in Schrader's claim is the phrase "taken as a whole." Since Schrader does not explicitly specify the corpus of Ozu's films examined in his study, what he means by the "whole" remains unclear. According to Schrader, "everyone must return to the evidence; one must analyze the films, scenes, and frames, hoping to extract the universal from the particular" (3). Yet, what is absent in his criticism is precisely the evidence for his claim.

Second, Schrader deliberately confounds the transcendental style as a specific film form with the transcendental experience as a represented content in film. He creates this confusion precisely by calling for the necessity of differentiating the two: "Before one can analyze the transcendental style in Ozu's films, one must make (or attempt to make) the crucial yet elusive distinction between transcendental art and the art of transcendental experience within Ozu's work. Do Ozu's films express the Transcendent, or do they express Ozu, Zen culture, and man's experience of the Transcendent?" (23). The phrase "one must make (or attempt to make) the crucial yet elusive distinction" indicates the extreme difficulty of differentiating Ozu's transcendental style (the universal) and Ozu's personality and Zen culture of Japan (the particular). But according to Schrader, what initially seems an almost impossible task becomes achievable once the question of culturally specific perspectives is introduced. To assert the value of the Western perspective, he first concedes its limitation.

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