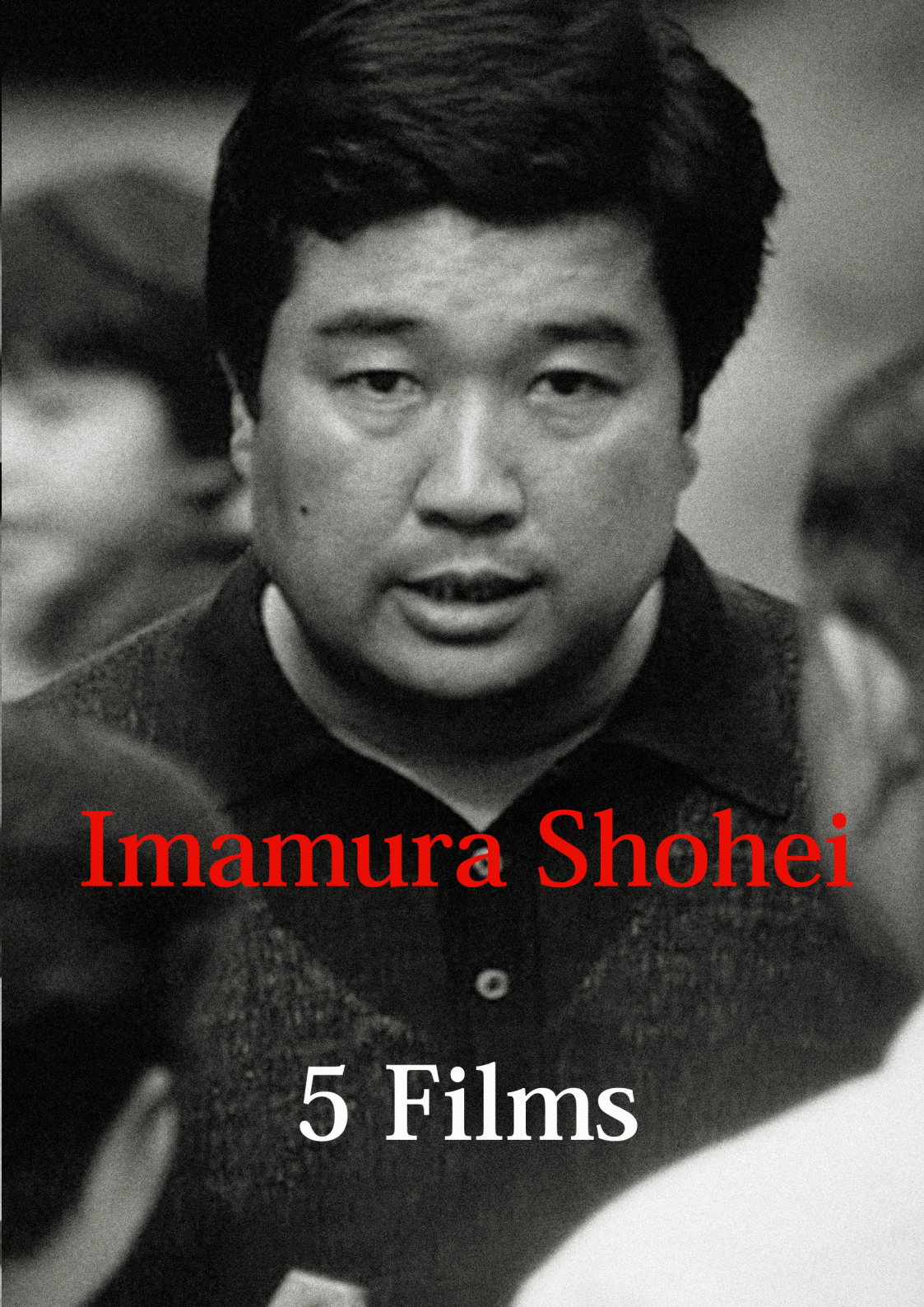


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Imamura Shohei

5 Films

Japanese New Wave Cinema Classics



JNWC # 10
Buta to gunkan / Hogs And Warships

JNWC # 11
Nippon konchuki / Insect Woman

JNWC # 12
Akai satsui / Intentions Of Murder

JNWC # 13
Ningen Johatsu / A Man Vanishes

JNWC # 14
Kamigami no fukaki yokubo / Profound Desire Of The Gods

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PIGS, PIMPS, AND PORNOGRAPHERS:

A Brief Introduction To The Films Of Shohei Imamura

By James Quandt

When Shohei Imamura won the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival for *The Eel* (*Unagi*), he became one of only three directors to win that award twice: He also took the Palme d'Or in 1983 for *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama bushiko*). The odd, arresting *Eel*, which is more sedate than much of Imamura's previous work, may prove to be the film that introduces a wide audience to a director long counted among the most important artists of post-war cinema, but little known outside of cinephile circles. (Imamura is currently at work on what he calls his last film, *Dr. Akagi* (*Kanzo Sensei*.) Humanist, iconoclast, "anthropologist," investigator and innovator, Imamura has produced a body of work over the past four decades that is unequalled for its audacious insights into Japanese society, its tumultuous energy and formal daring. As the retrospective for which we have prepared this volume reveals, Imamura can claim the designation traditionally reserved for his mentor Yasujiro Ozu: "The most Japanese of Japanese directors."

Imamura began his career in the Fifties as an apprentice to a number of directors, most prominently Yasujiro Ozu and Yuzo Kawashima. These two artists, utterly dissimilar in style, vision and reputation (one universally revered the other all but unknown outside of Japan), can be construed as representing two polarities which typify Japanese culture: "official" culture, the world of refinement and composure, of order and decorum, feudalistic

organization, and the virtues of self-abnegation and fidelity. “Official” culture encompasses everything from the Noh and the tea ceremony to elegant kimonos and yes-Ozu’s exquisite films. As Donald Richie points out in his essay on Imamura, “This is the ‘official’ version because it is also the exported version and it is this world which is shown the visitor. At the same time, however, it is truly ‘official’ in that it is approved by society. This is the way that Japanese society likes to see itself, whether or not it actually happens to be like this.”

On the other hand, the hard-drinking, nocturnal, eccentric, infirm and rebellious country boy Kawashima represents the “real” Japan, the world Imamura sees seething beneath what he has called “the veneer of business suits and advanced technology.” In his book-length tribute to Kawashima, whom he refers to as “my teacher,” Imamura wrote of the director’s country roots, his “love of vulgarity” and of red-light districts, and his fascination with the Edo period, whose conclusion ended Japan’s isolation and plunged it into a Century of upheaval. (Imamura returned to this era and milieu in his *Why Not? (Eijanaika.)*) Unlike Ozu’s fixed world, Kawashima’s is one of constant flux and motion. In the latter half of his short career, Kawashima tellingly favoured the Scope format-unthinkable for the miniaturist Ozu-for his energetic, occasionally crass portraits of the pillow geishas, sugar daddies and weirdos who inhabited his favourite setting: the inns and brothels of the “pleasure quarters,” far from Ozu’s comparatively rarefied realm.

These seemingly incompatible influences, then, shaped the work of Imamura. Though he acknowledges Ozu as a formative influence, Imamura rejects most everything about the master’s method; he recently told an interviewer “I work with actors in a very different way from Ozu. He instructs them on every detail: ‘Go forward three Steps, take the phone and lean to the right 30 degrees, speak after three light breaths,’ etc. I try to communicate more openly with them.” He also rejects the “official” nature of Ozu’s vision: the quiet, composed, and contemplative miniaturism, the serenity and decorous ritual, static formalism, and Zen-influenced acceptance of tragedy and death.

Imamura’s raucous, ribald scope epics about peasants and prostitutes, pimps, pornographers and peeping Toms trying to scrape together a little money and - this is often secondary - a little happiness, couldn’t be more unlike the tatami-and-tea melodramas of his (anti-) mentor. Imamura’s anarchic sensibility and energetic visual style, clearly inherited from Kawashima, celebrate everything that is excluded from Ozu’s refined world: the irrational, the instinctual, and the carnal, squalid, violent and superstitious life of Japan’s underclass, which Imamura insists has remained immutable over thousands of years. This search for the essence of the country, the “Japaneseness” that he feels modernity has distorted and disguised, is what makes him as or more “Japanese” than even Ozu.

Despite the conspicuous differences between mentor and apprentice, Donald Richie has argued that “we may now see Imamura and Ozu as very alike in certain important ways. Though their style and technique could not more differ, their concern for the natural, for the real, for the truth, is identical. So is their moral concern. With the difference that while Ozu saw the truth and beauty of the real slowly being eroded; Imamura sees it still as healthy, alive, and vital as ever.”

Like Robert Bresson’s runic statements about cinema, several of Imamura’s characteristically blunt pronouncements on his own art have become famous, none more so than this declaration: “I like to make messy films.” It’s easy to see what he means. His scope frames can barely contain the outsized performances, teeming energy and grotesque spectacle he is so fond of. Generically, his films conflate documentary and fiction in a confounding way that convention would deem “messy.” Echoing French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, Imamura has said, “I’d like to destroy this premise that cinema is fiction;” his “fiction” films are based on real-life stories and on meticulous, detailed research that has earned Imamura a reputation as cultural anthropologist, while his “documentaries,” most triumphantly *A Man Vanishes (Ningen Johatsu)*, often incorporate so many narrative devices that they blur into impure invention. (This strategy has had an immense influ-

ence on subsequent Japanese documentary, particularly on the work of Kazuo Hara, whose *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (*Yuki Yukite shingun*) was conceived and produced by Imamura.)

Thematically, too, Imamura's films can be characterized as "messy," rejecting as they do the "official" version of Japan and its emphasis on order, conformity, ritual, tradition and technological efficiency. In its place, Imamura portrays Japan as a tumultuous world in which chaos triumphs over civilization; in which voyeurism, violence, fetishism, superstition and incest are as unremarkable as they are recurrent; and in which amoral, willful, sexually driven women scramble to survive, rejecting the attempts of weak, dependent men to control them. (The vital, resilient, obdurate "Imamura woman" stands as a rebuke to the suffering, self-sacrificing victims of Mizoguchi's and Naruse's cinemas.)

The "messiness" of Imamura's cinema can be (and has been) overstated; taken literally, the term inevitably becomes pejorative, thereby obscuring Imamura's remarkable formal and narrative achievements. (In his tribute to Kawashima, Imamura emphasizes his own obsession with structure, comparing his methodical work on his mentor's scripts as being "like a student preparing for an exam. . . . The writing of a screenplay especially is something which can't be done without analysis, dissection and composition: in short, without painstaking labour." See, too, Derek Malcolm's stress on Imamura's "subtlety of expression.") For example, the manic, flashy *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta tu gunkan*) has a narrative precision and formal control that belie its track-and-crane-crazy camera style. Similarly, Imamura's trio of masterpieces, *The Insect Woman* (*Nippon konchuki*), *The Pornographers* (*Jinruigaku nyumon: Erogotshi yori*), and *Intentions of Murder* (*Akai satsui*), are all intricately designed. As hectic as it sometimes is, *The Pornographers* rigorously inscribes its theme of voyeurism with three visual devices: Imamura often shoots scenes through windows, screens and doors, deploying obstructions within the scope frame to force the spectator into the position of "peeping Tom;" he punctuates the film with looming shots

of the ever-watchful carp and bizarre point-of-view shots from its tank (as weird in their way as Raul Ruiz's celebrated POV shots); and, in the final image, he reduces the image to the size of one of Subu's porn movies as two of the pornographer's assistants comment on it, a reflexive ending that leads one to ask, "who is the voyeur here?" and "is Imamura equating his film with that of his hero - does he include himself as one of the pornographers of the title?"

Intentions of Murder may on first viewing seem impossibly teeming, but on close examination it is designed so that any single image or motif helps disclose the meaning of the rest of the film (and, by extension, that of the rest of Imamura's cinema): the train or snow, for example, or the interplay between the insistent motif of modern appliances (television, fridge, iron, knitting machine) and the animal imagery that runs throughout the film, which connects Sadako, the bovine heroine, to rodents and especially to silk worms, both emphasizing her ancientness and intractability. (Compare the memorably vital Sadako to the men in her life, all of them sickly, ineffectual, impotent, and dying. Even her son Matsura is ailing, so the future holds no hope for the males in her household.)

Another seemingly insignificant detail in *Intentions* turns out to be thematically important. The librarian Koichi, Sadako's mate, files a book as he talks to another librarian, a woman with whom he is having an affair. The book, if one cares to notice, is Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. One can read this in many ways - merely as a glancing jest, or as one of many signs of Western influence on the cold, autocratic Koichi (unlike the primevally Japanese peasant Sadako, whom he refuses to marry). The very setting for this transaction - a library, with its rows of books all neatly indexed and ordered-bespeaks the official culture with which Koichi is associated, again in contradistinction to Sadako's slovenly, obtuse and instinctual "animal" nature. One can ponder (but not for long) the relevance of Marcuse's thought to Imamura's work. Or, untethering the title of the book from Marcuse's theories, one can see its dichotomy as encapsulating a cardinal Imamura

theme, the Opposition that is central to his entire cinema: the raw, primordial sexuality he consistently celebrates as a force that undermines the “civilization” of official Japan. In another of his famous pronouncements, Imamura has said, “I am interested in the relationship of the lower part of the human body and the lower part of the social structure,” a metaphor that can serve as a paradigm for and guide through his cinema. Imamura may not be the intellectual that his compatriot Nagisa Oshima was - he told Audie Bock, “I am a country farmer, Oshima is a samurai” - but his cunningly conceived films are amongst the most brilliant and complex in post-war cinema. They are also, to use one of Imamura’s favourite words, very “juicy.”



Insect women (mother and daughter) in *Insect Woman*

Visual Interlude I

Opening sequence of *Intentions of Murder*



1 Long-shot. A steam train, Imamura's metaphor for male (violent) sexuality is running towards the camera. The steam trains will return repeatedly as a leit-motiv throughout the film.

2 Fast 90° pan ending with a freeze frame of Sadako's house.





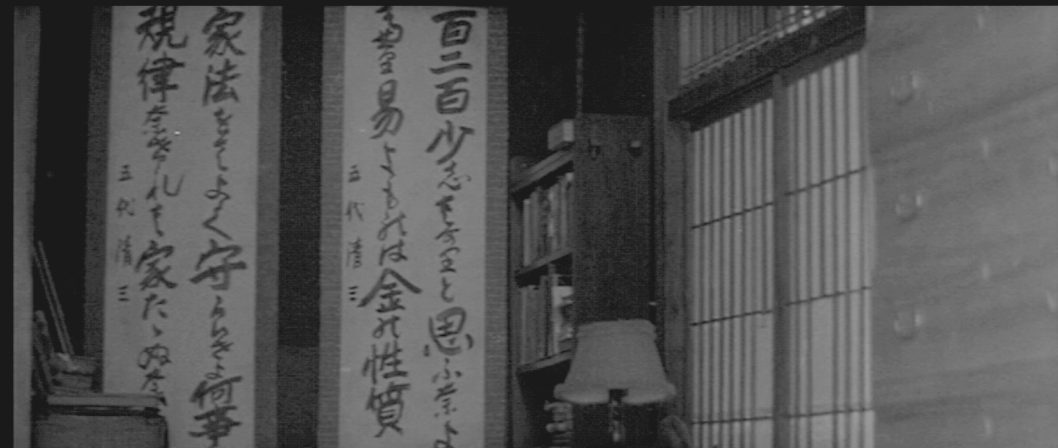
3 Reverse angle shot of 2 - again a freeze frame. Now the passing train is seen from the yard of Sadako's house. The extreme contrast of the fast running train depicted in a still frame connotes the contrast between aggressive male and passive female sexuality.

4 Freeze frame. Cut to a view of the train from inside the house. The grating of the window has two opposing connotations: security from the fast changing, dynamic world outside, and imprisonment. The house (-hold) Sadako lives in is a symbol for the "cage of marriage" and the traditional female gender role.



5 Still of a surrealistic drawing of a face. (In fact it is a drawing by Sadako's son, who covers the walls of the house with his graffiti-like drawings). The wild, expressionistic style depicts violence and fear.

6 Still of the living room with two scrolls in the foreground. The scrolls contain traditional rules and advices for a happy and successful marriage and family live. Bracketed between the "face of fear" and the following shot from the inside of a cage, the still becomes a acerbic, ironic comment.





7 Still. View from the living room through another barred window into the yard. The impression of “being caged-in” is becoming stronger. The left edge of picture shows a detail of the unmoving pendulum of the family clock, indicating that time stands still in this place: nothing ever happens.

8 Still. The first rectangular composition, with low camera angle perspective, typical for Ozu’s monadic “family pictures”, where conflict always develops “inside”.



9 Cut to a cramped medium shot of the kitchen. Another still frame on first sight, the slowly dripping tap in the lower left corner of the scope reveals that in fact it isn’t a still, repeating and increasing the impression of time standing still from the previous shots.

10 Cut to a cage with 2 white rats, one of which is running in a running wheel. The main metaphor of the film shows a hectic circular movement that leads nowhere. A perfect illustration of Sadako’s situation in the film’s story.





NOTES FOR A STUDY

On Shohei Imamura

By Donald Richie

With the completion of fourteen feature-length theatrical films and a number of shorter television documentaries, Shohei Imamura has emerged as one of Japan's most interesting directors.

Born in Tokyo in 1926, Imamura was the son of a physician and obviously intended for the elite. He attended primary and secondary schools, which should have resulted in the prestigious University of Tokyo and a secure and well-paid job among the professions. He would have been a loyal and devout supporter of official Japan; would have married well within his own social class, and his children would have repeated this pattern so beneficial to modern Japan.

This, however, did not occur. After graduating from secondary school Imamura turned away from this socially approved goal. He became interested in modern theatre and worked for several such troupes and wrote a number of plays. Originally uninterested in the cinema, he entered films only because the stage offered no way for him to make a living and the films at least offered an occupation.

Imamura himself has never for long dwelt upon the reasons for this early and extraordinary decision to leave the prepared path, but given the evidence of his films, one may deduce a few.

One of the first inferences to make is that there are actually two Japans. One is the "official" version, the often beautiful world of the Noh and the tea

ceremony, the subservient kimono-clad woman, the feudality of exquisitely graded degrees of social standing, and such approved virtues as fidelity, loyalty, devotion-in short anything which the outside world knows of Japan. This is the “official” version because it is also the exported version and it is this world that is shown the visitor. At the same time, however, it is truly “official” in that it is approved by society. This is the way that Japanese society likes to see itself, whether or not it actually happens to be like this.

The other Japan might, judging from Imamura’s films, be called the “real” version. His people, it has often been noted, do not behave like “Japanese” because none of the rules of order and decorum insisted upon by the official version apply. These people, always from the so-called lower classes, do not know the meaning of fidelity or loyalty. They are completely natural and are to that extent “uncivilized” if civilization means (as it does) a removal from the natural. They are selfish, lusty, amoral, innocent, natural, and all of the vitality of Japan comes from their numbers.

It is one of Imamura’s theses that this acquired “official” civilization has long threatened to smother the true Japanese character. Further, that Japan has in this regard experienced a long history of repression. Until the middle of the nineteenth century Japan endured one of the longest police-states in history: the Tokugawa period. This means whole centuries when the officials attempted to repress the most reprehensible but also the most natural instincts of the people.

An observation common to all of Imamura’s films is that this naturalness-hidden, muffled, concealed though it is by official Japan (in itself simply a continuation of the feudalism of the Tokugawa)-is irrepressible. It will bubble forth at every opportunity. One of the real strengths of the Japanese these films show is that they have somehow managed to retain this innocent naturalness.

This very Rousseau-like idea, however, does not insist that such asocial, amoral naturalness is good. Imamura is content to simply state, over and over again and in a great variety of ways that it continues and endures. He does, however, imply (and it is difficult not to agree with him) that the true nature of the Japanese lies in this real version and not in the wish-fulfilling “official” version. It is to this he referred when (speaking with film historian Audie Bock) he said that “I happen to be more interested in the Japan that flourished before the artistic decadence fostered by political isolation in the feudal period.” It is also to this he referred when he later said: “The Japanese did not change as a result of the Pacific War...they haven’t changed in thousands of years.”

Imamura, judging from the evidence of his films, also very early saw the “official” version as a lie and the “real” version as the truth. It was perhaps this apprehension that led him to join those so far down the social scale (and in Japan actors are among them) that official Japan has no social use for them. Here, among these people (and those others, prostitutes, pimps, gangsters and whatever proletariat is left in modern Japan) to whom polite Japanese society gives no social role, Imamura may have felt that he was finally in touch with reality.

If one of Imamura’s major themes is precisely this confrontation of illusion with reality (and the resultant problem of telling which is which), it perhaps began when Imamura, the young student, contrasted the lives of his parents with the lives of his friends-the myth of the official version with the certainty of the real version. It was perhaps here that his investigations began, progressing to his much more sophisticated present position where “reality” itself becomes suspect. At the same time, however, his manner of showing this reality indicates that he remains satisfied with it, that he realizes that this is as near the truth as we are likely to get.

During the year that Imamura worked as an assistant director, among the

directors he assisted was Yasujiro Ozu—on *Tokyo Story* and several later pictures. He deeply resented Ozu's methods and did not like working with him. What he disliked was what he saw as Ozu's celebration of the official version—the serene world of Japanese aesthetics.

These emotions now seem strange to him when he looks at Ozu's films. The older director was perfectly aware of the real under the official and this is, indeed, what his pictures are ultimately about. This he underlines time and time again when (for example) his characters get together and drink in some small middle-class bar, when they get drunk together, and the real is shown erupting through the official.

Perhaps what Imamura more resented was Ozu's way with actors. The older director was frankly dictatorial and he knew just what he wanted. He wanted a reaction so artless, so natural, if you will, that he would exhaust an actor with, say, thirty takes of a short scene until finally the actor's art had been erased and the thirty-first take, an exhausted actor no longer able to act, was the one the director wanted.

Imamura resented what he thought was Ozu's lack of concern for reality. Actually, Ozu was equally concerned with the real, but this was something which the resentful assistant director could not then know. We may now see Imamura and Ozu as very alike in several important ways. Though their style and technique could not more differ, their concern for the natural, for the real, for the truth, is identical. So is their moral concern, with the difference that while Ozu saw the truth and beauty of the real slowly being eroded, Imamura sees it still as healthy, alive and vital as ever.

I once asked the late Shiro Toyoda why it was that Japanese actresses are so much better than Japanese actors. He said that this was because women have to practise acting all of their lives. From the first day they are forced to

counterfeit their emotions, are under a restraint never to tell or show the truth; rather, they are encouraged to display only the false, which is the Japanese man's idea of the feminine. Consequently, any Japanese woman, professional actress or amateur, will turn in a better performance than any Japanese man. She has had a lifetime of practice.

Toyoda was observing a deep and apparently permanent difference between the sexes in Japan, one created by male expectations and aspirations. He was also implying that Japanese women are, in actuality, far different from the various social roles they are forced or agree to play. In his own films he was always careful to observe this important division between female reality and the feminine role.

Those Japanese directors who know this, however (Kozaburo Yoshimura is another) are rare. Most (and this includes Kenji Mizoguchi, Mikio Naruse, sometimes Ozu) seem to have been taken in, as it were, by the myth of the accepting, long-suffering Japanese woman. They seem to believe that this obedient and self-demeaning creature, caught in her own culture, denied of a number of rights elsewhere considered basic, is all there is to Japanese women.

Among those who know otherwise and make films demonstrating this is Shohei Imamura. In fact, demonstrating the true nature of the Japanese woman is one of his aims in filmmaking and the delineation of this actual nature, so different from that shown in other Japanese films, is one of his themes.

One of the reasons for this insistence is, of course, Imamura's regard for truth. Another, however, and one perhaps equally as strong, is his anger at the way that Japanese women are portrayed in films, particularly in the Ofuna productions of Shochiku, the first studio for which he worked. True women, he told Audie Bock, are strong. "They outlive men even. But self-sacrificing women like the heroines of Naruse's *Floating Clouds*

(*Ukigumo*) and Mizoguchi's *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikahu Ichidai Onna*) don't really exist." This being so, he particularly resented the comfortable Ofuna home-dramas he was assisting to make during the early part of his career.

Certainly, as soon as he became himself a director, he insisted upon the tough and grasping women of *Endless Desire* (*Hateshi Naki Yokubo*) and the earthy, conniving strippers of *Stolen Desire* (*Nusumareta Yokujo*), a title incidentally stuck on by the production company; Imamura wanted it to be called *Tent Theatre*.

The Imamura woman receives her first full-length portrait in *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta to Gunkan*), where the Jitsuko Yoshimura character, a strong young woman, cannot protect her innocence but closely guards her determination. (*Illus. 1*) Gang-banged by the American military, she nonetheless scrambles out of her awful life and into something better.

The heroine of *Intentions of Murder* (*Akai Satsui*) (*Illus. 2*), another rape victim, through sheer determination outlives the rapist, legalizes the resultant son, and triumphantly comes into her own in a man's world. The woman in *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen Johatsu*) has forgotten about the missing object of her search in the first fifteen minutes of the film and pragmatically transferred her affections to the interviewer who is helping her find him. In *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (*Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo*), the young shaman, a mentally disturbed girl, is also possessed of a vitality that allows her to survive in a modern civilization which would attempt to extinguish that very quality.

The wife in *Vengeance is Mine* (*Fukushu Suru Wa Ware Ni Ari*) manages against all odds to survive her murderer husband. The one who does not is the lonely innkeeper who seems to believe the male version of the woman's role. The bar hostess in *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (*Nippon Sengo Shi: Madamu Omboro no Seikatsu*) has only scorn for the male version of the Pacific War with its sufferings and its heroics. "It wasn't that way at all," she says.



(III. 1 / 2 / 3) Jitsuko in *Pigs and Battleships*, Sadako in *Intentions of Murder* and Tomé in *Insect Woman*: three typical women heroines of Imamura

Certainly then, one of Imamura's themes is that Japanese women are not at all the way they are popularly portrayed. His women are very tough, both physically and psychologically. They simply do not believe in the petty tribal laws that govern Japanese men-and all men in general.

Consequently they are dishonest, disloyal, amoral, and given over entirely to looking after themselves alone. Imamura's metaphor for such a woman is the insect; always with us, never changing, always the same, always triumphing through sheer energy and determination.

It is this metaphor that is seen in the title and opening scene (*Illus. 4*) of his most complete portrait of the Japanese woman as she is in *The Insect Woman* (*Nippon Konchuki*). In the first sequence of the film a small insect is making its way, absolutely determined. The final sequence shows the heroine (Sachiko Hidari) behaving in a precisely similar manner. (*Illus. 5*) Like the insect, she is trying to get up a hill. Though various things happen, she soils her *tabi* stockings, breaks her *geta* (occurrences which would make a Naruse heroine burst into tears), she disregards these minor misfortunes and struggles on.

The film is, in fact, a chronicle of her struggle, a string of connected anecdotes illustrating her determination, structured through small non-narrative flashbacks and a wealth of instructive parallel scenes. An example of the former occurs when after her foster father's death she looks at his photograph in the household shrine; cut to scene years earlier, already previously viewed in its entirety, of her as a young girl giving her breast to him.

An example of the use of parallel scenes occurs when she is working as a reluctant prostitute and the madam offers to take her money if she doesn't want it, and she quickly drops her compunctions and takes the money; later in the film she does exactly the same thing to a younger prostitute when she herself has become a madam. Again, when the first madam is caught by the cops she signals to the heroine that she is to remain silent, which she does not, causing the downfall of her employer; again, when the heroine, now



(Ill. 4 / 5) Allegory in *Insect Woman* (*Nippon konchuki*)

madam herself, is caught she signals to one of her girls, going off to be questioned by the cops, and is herself disobeyed.

These flashbacks and parallels, just two of Imamura's means, impose a structure on the film and indicate (among other things) a kind of absolute. They seem to suggest that all women always act in this way, that this has happened again and again, that we are being shown an example of what women are really like. This means that we are not invited to empathize with the woman herself, as we are in the films of Naruse and Mizoguchi. In fact, empathy is the last thing that (in any of his pictures) Imamura wants.

He wants just the opposite and told Audie Bock that he wanted "to work away from the pattern of suffering and pathos of the usual woman's film, so I used freeze frames and humour to make the spectator laugh at her and therefore stand in a critical position."

One of the reasons for this decision was that Imamura was searching for a way both to reflect the truth about women in general and about the actual woman he had in mind. In preparations for *The Insect Woman*, he interviewed at great length a forty-year-old madam and it was upon her that he modelled his protagonist.

As he told film producer Alan Poul, he had discovered that "the truth was so interesting that I could not figure out how to make a scenario from it." He needed the "critical position" so that the spectator would also discover the truth about women, undisturbed by empathy and identification.

This truth that women are stronger than men, that they understand the world as it is much better, their selfishness, their amorality, their lack of real concern over anything but themselves, this compels Imamura's admiration. The same kind of women have been shown in Japanese films before, in Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame (Akasen Chitai)*, for example, or Naruse's *Arakure (Untamed)*, but usually we are invited to commiserate with such

women, the implication being that since they do not fit the (male-defined) female role they will end up deserted and unfortunate.

In Imamura's films, however, and particularly in *The Insect Woman*, we are invited to see in women a superior species that understands its environment and triumphs over it. Imamura finds this admirable. In all of his films the woman wins, though she is often contrasted (as in *Vengeance is Mine*, the successful wife, the unsuccessful innkeeper) with a woman who plays the game of Japanese life according to the rules that men make up. Imamura's heroines, on the contrary, survive and prosper. And as to their real prevalence, Imamura once said: "My heroines are true to life—just look around you at Japanese women."

"Medium height and weight, light colouring, smooth skin. The face of a woman who loves men. Maternal . . . good genitals. Juicy." Imamura was describing (to Audie Bock) the kind of woman he intended to portray in *Intentions of Murder*, but the description covers all of his women.

The sexual emphasis is strong. Her genitals are in good working order (juicy), and she likes to make love. At the same time, or perhaps consequently, she is maternal. This is very like Imamura.

Many Japanese men (many men in general) would never make this connection between good juicy genitals and mother. That one is the result of the other is a conclusion that must not be allowed to occur. Mother is a sacred object and mother's vagina is not a thought upon which many men dwell. To mother herself, however, her vagina is an important and connected part of her body.

A woman's sexuality is important to her because sexuality is basic to human nature. Men may and do attempt to deny this but women, particularly



(III. 6 / 7) “Grotesque” sexuality in *Insect Woman* and *Vengeance is Mine*

Imamura’s women, would never think of anything this moralistic. Their natural world, which is the natural world itself, is amoral and the fit most survive.

Imamura’s films include more scenes of sexual intercourse than do most Japanese films. The way in which he pictures copulation, however, is ambivalent. Given his women, one would think that he would show them being sexually aggressive and manipulating men. In actuality, however, we are shown them being apparently manipulated. (*Illus. 6/7*)

Often they are taken from behind, that position least supportive to a woman’s dignity. In *Vengeance is Mine* there is a closely cropped scene where the innkeeper is being entered. Her head occupies the lower right of the frame. In the upper left is the torso and head of her patron. In several other Imamura pictures women are bent over, skirts raised, wheeled into position and entered, the scene in *The Insect Woman* for example, where the heroine’s daughter is thus entered by her mother’s boyfriend. Out of context the scene might be from one of Japan’s many soft-core porno films which specialize in the degradation of women.

Such manipulation is, however, merely apparent. This Imamura indicates by showing us that it is only the women who are enjoying the act. Something is usually happening to mar the pleasure of the men. In *The Insect Woman*, the boyfriend loses his false teeth; in *Vengeance is Mine*, the patron develops a sudden cramp in his foot which the innkeeper must manage as he goes on as best he can. The inference is that in such a natural situation as this it is only the female who, despite her undignified position, enjoys herself. Further, any dignity or lack of it is far from the woman’s thoughts. Both the act and all of its positions are natural to her; natural to us all would but men realize it.

Though women (Jitsuko Yoshimura, for example, in both *Pigs and Battle-*

ships and *The Insect Woman*) occasionally use sex as an inducement or as a threat (in the manner of many other films and many another film heroine), one more often finds the Imamura woman simply and naturally enjoying sex for itself.

Imamura has many ways of showing this natural enjoyment, and the natural importance of love. One of the most oblique but most telling occurs in *A Man Vanishes* when the subject of love is first talked about. Heretofore the film's style has seemed straight *cinema vérité*: we have watched the people, been aware of both Imamura and his camera, been assured that what we are seeing is a straight documentary account.

When the young woman searching for her missing lover first speaks of love, however, the film's style radically changes. Her face is suddenly shown in freeze-frame, though her voice track continues. When the others speak, they are all in lip-synch; when the camera returns to her it is to the same frozen frame. The effect is that an objective view has become suddenly subjective. We feel that it is love/sex which is responsible for this frozen image. We infer how completely important it is to her.

Indications of the importance of love to women are certainly not lacking in the cinema, but the difference is that Imamura approves of this and shows us his approval. In the films of other directors, scenes of similar import are shown; including that Japanese porno favourite: the woman obsessed by sex, grovelling and whimpering while man, the dedicated craftsman, continues above her, calm, collected. But these are used to indicate the director's disapproval, as well as his prurience. In the films of Imamura the woman's casual acceptance of the sexual basis of most things finds the director agreeing. This is the way that human beings are, did but men realize it.

"I am interested in the relationship of the lower part of the human body and the lower part of the social structure on which the reality of daily Japanese life supports itself." In telling critic Koichi Yamada this, Imamura suggested that just as the genitals are the true basis of the person, so are the so-called lower classes the true makers of the nation. And just as the genitals and their functions are hidden, so are the lower classes of society ignored. In both cases, their importance remains unacknowledged though their symbolic relationship is apparent.

While this is true in all countries, it is particularly true in Japan, a country which is more hypocritical than most. Certainly the official Japanese presentation of a feminine, docile, kimonoed beauty on one hand, and an equally docile "office lady" on the other, presents little. Even when the official view (as seen in the films of Mizoguchi and Naruse, for example) allows that both the Japanese woman and the Japanese working class are unhappy, this is still by now means all there is to present.

There is an important sub-stratum in Japan (peasant, proletarian, and-says Imamura-women) which is barely touched by the civilities of the official Japanese view, and are certainly not included in it. It is this that he makes his films about.

Both *Stolen Desire* and *Endless Desire* are about classless people: actors and strippers in one, the low edge of the lower middle-class in the other; *My Second Brother (Nianchan)* and *Pigs and Battleships* are both about the proletariat, one, the working class, the other, the criminal class; *The Insect Woman* is about a peasant girl who lives outside the law and outside society; *Intentions of Murder* is about a peasant woman in the city, and *The Pornographers* is about people whose activities are illegal; *The Profound Desire of the Gods* is about peasants, and *A Man Vanishes* is about the new middle class, people who have risen from the proletariat background; *Vengeance is Mine* is about the same milieu, and *Eijanaika* is about the low life of Edo.

Imamura's interest in the lower classes is remarkably consistent, and the fact that he has rarely made a film about anything else (*Nishi-Ginza Station*, which he did not want to make, is an exception) argues for a deep interest and, given the temptations and pressures of the industry, an equally profound determination.

A part of this is certainly admiration for his characters. Just as he admires women because they are natural and above all man-made laws, so he admires the unregenerate working classes of Japan because they too remain even now untouched by the rationalizations, hypocrisy and face-saving which so characterize their betters. In both, it is the determination, the will, and the honesty that he admires.

Some of the most moving moments in Imamura's films come when the characters collide with the official Japanese point of view and then veer back to themselves once again. In *Intentions of Murder*, the woman is raped. Her first reaction is that, as a proper Japanese girl, she must commit suicide. What she actually does, however, is to open the refrigerator and eat a big meal. After that the idea of suicide becomes comfortably distant.

At other times, Imamura's characters use the logic of official Japan to explain their actions. The pornographer in *The Pornographers* insists that he is filling a civic function through his work, that his products are necessary to the nation's well-being. The humour is that he is, of course, absolutely right. It is the official view ("Japan has no pornography") which is wrong.

In *The Insect Woman*, the heroine bases her business (prostitution) upon the same considerations as do respectable Japanese business firms. She is, in her successful maneuvering, no different than they. The point, however, is not that she resembles the firm but that it resembles her, with the exception that she is, by comparison, more open and honest.

The truly criminal, dangerous hero of *Vengeance is Mine* is, though himself

a member of the newly elevated proletariat, actually much more an "official" Japanese than he is a member of his real class. He talks and thinks like a typically upper-class Japanese, one who believes all the propaganda of the "official" view. The difference is that these people do not murder, though their ideas all point toward that end. He does, and here he might be seen as a negative definition of the admired Imamura character. He (like many upper-class Japanese) is only the sum of his various roles. He has no core, no inside.

In making this film the director said that he wanted to make a picture about a man with no *kokoro*, a phrase we might translate as "no heart," but which also means "no self." Imamura continued with: "Inside this man, could there be nothing but hollowness?" Then, "I think I can here see the lonely inner state of today's man," by which he means, of course, today's Japanese. They are a hollow people whose only definition are their work and their (consequent) status.

Conversely, those who have no approved work and (consequently) no social status are those who have full and healthy *kokoro*. Though at the bottoms of all charts and the ends of all lines, it is these people who know who they are, who know what life is about. They are deeply selfish in the sense of being full of self, ambitious, grasping, filled with the vitality which can only come from a self-assurance which the director so admires that he has devoted all of his films to a celebration of it.

One does not usually admire what one is part of. Imamura's characters certainly do not admire each other or the state in which they find themselves. It is their creator, their director who admires them. He does not feel himself to be one of them and here Imamura resembles an intellectual looking at the unlettered masses and envying them.

He admires, precisely, their wholeness, for it is this that gives them their strength and ambition, saves them from the fragmentation that the intellec-

tual (being intelligent) often suffers. That Imamura does not himself experience this wholeness is perhaps one of the reasons for his interest and consequently his films.

It is also perhaps the reason for the distance from which he views his characters. He is never one of them. Rather, as has been often noted, he is like an anthropologist visiting a tribe, or like an entomologist observing that favourite Imamura metaphor: insect life.

From *The Insect Woman* onward Imamura began to be known for his “documentary approach.” The film seems not only objective, detached, but it is also constructed not like a plotted feature film but like a story-line *actualité*. The director told Audie Bock that he did this because he wanted to make the spectator stand in a position critical to the heroine of the film. Hence he used endistancing devices (freeze frame, etc.), refused the consolations of plot, and consequently seemed to imply that this was not a fiction film, but rather, the real thing, actual life observed by the documentary camera.

The director’s *The Making of a Prostitute (Karayuki-san)*, a real documentary, is constructed in much the same way as his feature films. Here Imamura goes to Southeast Asia to make a picture about one of the women who were forced into prostitution by the Japanese military government. Though we have no footage from the actual life, Imamura interviews her in such a way that the scenes of this life are always before us, images of buildings, of places, as she describes what her life was like.

As in *The Insect Woman*, we are offered no plot at all, but rather scenes (specimen slides we might call them) from the life we are studying. In both pictures (and in others by Imamura) there is the feeling that we are observing with a reason. We spectators have become scientists in that we are invited to study and to discover. This, however, is a statement that

Imamura might temper. He said of himself: “An observer, certainly ... an anthropologist, not really.”

In the actual documentaries, we are asked to discover why something has happened: why, for example, the soldiers did not return to Japan after the war. And the answers in these documentaries are the same: we became as we are because Japan did something to us and we do not wish to return to it.

The Japan that did something to them is not the Japan of people like those in *Pigs and Battleships* and *The Insect Woman*. It is that of the people who constitute official Japan: the government, the army, the navy, the ruling class.

Imamura’s method is that of the intellectual who has seen this and who now, like a scientist, displays his finding. Even his longest fiction feature film uses this approach. *The Profound Desire of the Gods* is about a primitive Japan which until recently survived, with its superstition and its shamans in the far southern islands of the archipelago. An engineer from Tokyo, a kind of scientist, visits them and sees that these people are the real ones; they are the true Japanese, not those in Tokyo.

Imamura begins his film with scenes of the wildlife of the islands: the birds, the crabs, the insects. The implication is that the characters are just as natural as are these creatures. The director then shows what happens when official Japan enters. In one of his directly confrontational linkings of sequences (constructed so that it can be seen as cause and effect), we see the coming of the airplane, the railway, Coca-Cola, and consequently the end of the life we have been invited to study and admire. (*Illus. 8/9*)

Imamura’s own comment that this will somehow continue, the shot of the demented girl, now become herself a shaman, dancing in front of the oncoming locomotive is, though subjective (that is, the scene is not “real”), presented to us in precisely the same manner as those which showed us the birds and the beasts, as documentary evidence.



(III. 8 / 9) Allegories of modernity in *Profound Desire of the Gods*

In contrast to most other directors Imamura never asks us to believe anything we are not shown. He always presents his evidence and this makes its own comment. Though it is the director who is, after all, giving us selected material, the feeling is that we are ourselves discovering the essence of whatever we are shown.

The single film where we must feel this is *A Man Vanishes*, a picture which purports to be a documentary, one in which reality seems in view in every frame.

It begins in classic documentary style. An official is reading a report about the missing man. He gives us, a direct statement read to the camera, an amount of information. We are then shown a photograph of the man, Tadashi Oshima.

We are next shown, though we do not yet know who or what this is, Imamura himself and the poster for the film we are now seeing, a poster which holds the photograph of Oshima. Thus in the first moments of the picture we are given the subject and at the same time the means through which this subject will be investigated.

This is proper scientific procedure. All anthropologists know that their presence will affect the object of study, that the camera will alter the behaviour of the material researched. *Cinema verité* is the truth. Imamura, however, is far too honest a filmmaker to believe this, as he will demonstrate in this scientific-seeming film.

The objective stance is initially insisted upon. No shooting script was used for the picture, a decision which implies that decisions were to be made in front of the camera and not behind it. A further implication is that the director cannot help but be objective since all subjective power is taken from him by this decision. He cannot create his film; he can only record its cre

ation. All subjectivity, all choice, all power seemed relinquished. The director becomes an ideal vehicle for the truth.

This detachment, this relinquishing of control is, of course, only seeming. The director is still the director, though his choices are now covert rather than overt. He still decides what to photograph, what to edit, and during editing, what to show and what to hide.

The early documentary-makers could remain invisible behind their cameras, but later filmmakers find that they must become a part of the film they are making. A part of the decision comes from the realization that the reality of the scene is enhanced by the appearance of director and crew. A larger reason, however, is that the nature of apprehended reality on film has changed since the early days of documentary filmmaking.

Simply showing something on the screen and labelling it real is no longer enough. Reality is now a more complex matter than it used to be. Reality must now be proved real. And it is there that the paraphernalia of filmmaking is of use. That the camera lies is now generally known. If we can watch it in action, however, it seems to us to have less opportunity to lie.

It was from such considerations that *A Man Vanishes* was made. Imamura, as we have seen, included himself in the first minutes of the picture. Later he appears full-face close-up for the first time. We still do not know who he is. In the dialogue that follows, however, it gradually becomes clear that this sudden new character is actually the director. We see him discussing the nature of his search, how best to film it. We also learn that the man who is helping the girl search for the vanished man is really an actor. He played the rapist in *Intentions of Murder*; a film which the heroine has apparently not seen.

This deception is emphasized in a later scene where director and actor are talking. Imamura says: "You know, she may be falling in love with you." To which the actor replies: "That would be awful." And Imamura then says: "No, that is just what I want."

So much for *cinema verité*. Imamura has in one line of dialogue openly exposed himself and his intentions. He has made visible what most documentarians seek to hide: that a real-life film is just as directed as any other kind; that even though the director may not invent what is to be shown, he still picks and chooses and this creates his own reality.

Having established this, Imamura now moves to a scene of the girl having hysterics, she is truly in love with the actor/interviewer and is most unhappy because he is not properly responding. This "plot-point" established, the director cuts to a press conference the subject of which is the making of this film. From "reality" we have moved in three short scenes to "a representation of reality;" from a film called *A Man Vanishes*, we have moved to an essay on "How the Making of the Film Affected the Film."

We are now quite ready to understand that the director's objectivity is questioned by the director himself, and that he does not believe in it. This objectivity, this distancing, is but another facet of the director's style. It is only seemingly objective, seemingly distanced, and it cannot be anything else but this because of the nature of reality itself.

"Mr. Director, what is truth?" This line is spoken, this question asked, by the heroine just before the film's climactic scene. It is a bald, openly motivated line: not at all the kind that this character (or any real-life character) would ask. It is contrived, originated in the head of Imamura, and has no claim to any kind of actuality at all because it is a cue.

It cues the action which follows, a demonstration of Imamura's ideas about illusion and reality. This subject had been discussed earlier in the film, at the press conference and in the dialogues which followed.

These briefly also include a suspicion the woman searching for the missing man entertains, that her own sister has been having an affair with him. There is the further suspicion, planted by an obviously fraudulent medium, and mercilessly encouraged by Imamura himself, that this sister may actually have killed him. What is true and what is not? Melodrama threatens.

The only evidence is the opinion of a talkative and opinionated fishmonger who claims that he saw the sister and the missing man in perhaps incriminating circumstances. Imamura now brings these principals together to thrash it out and discover just what the truth is.

The scene is a private dining room in a small restaurant. The four of them (including Imamura and, of course, his invisible cameraman) are sitting there talking. The sister proclaims her innocence and the heroine and the fishmonger proclaim her guilt.

The conversation goes on and on since everyone believes what she or he is saying. As a scene it lasts a long time and its content is minuscule. It is, of course, the director's intention that it goes nowhere. Then what is the truth, wonders the distraught heroine.

Imamura does not answer her question. He gives the signal usually used at the beginning of a scene: *Hai! Sutaato! (Start)* There are some creaking sounds and then the back wall of the room begins to move. It slides slowly upward, hanging in air. At the same time other walls start to fall away. The camera backs off and reveals the fact that we are actually in a film studio. (Illus. 10/11)

At a further signal from the director, all the studio lights are turned on.



There in the midst of this enormous space are the four principals of the scene sitting on a small tatami platform. “This is fiction,” said Imamura, answering the girl’s question.

The screen is a *coup de cinema*. The director has led his actors to this set disguised as a restaurant and their astonishment is palpable. What they had thought real has been revealed as illusion. He has also, at the same time, brought us to the same conclusions.

Taken in by *cinema verité*, we have been attending only because we believed it was “real,” and now we are actually astonished that what we had thought fact is, in fact, fiction. This is the climactic scene in the film because we have been directly shown and have acutely experienced Imamura’s major premise. Reality is something which we ourselves construct. As for abstract reality, it does not exist.

Thus both sisters and the fishmonger are all telling the truth, no matter how these various truths refuse to reconcile themselves with each other. It is not only that truth is relative but that reality is relative as well. The subjectivity of reality has been exposed by the objectivity of the director, but, as we have seen, this very objectivity is subjective as well.

Now upset, the three continue their altercation out of the studio and onto the street. Passer-bys join, neighbours take part. Finally, confronted with a conundrum of its own creation, the camera can only back away. None of the ostensible questions of the plot itself are answered; the mystery of the missing man is never solved.

But the unasked question is answered. And the answer is that people direct their own films, which they call their lives, and they make their own plots which they call reality.

“No one understands what is real and what is fantasy. Imamura’s crime for the Japanese critics is that he mixes the two indistinguishably.” When the late poet-playwright Shuji Terayama told this to Joan Mellen, he was thinking not only of *A Man Vanishes* but of many other of the director’s pictures. *Nishi-Ginza Station (Nishi-Ginza Eki-Mae)* contrasts the hero’s everyday real life with his romantic memories of a completely illusionary tropical-island wartime love affair. In *Endless Desire* the illusion is how rich everyone will be once they have discovered the wartime-hidden hoard of morphine and reality is that the entire cast dies. In *Pigs and Battleships* and *The Insect Woman* both heroines turn out in reality to be very different from their fantasies selves. In *Intentions of Murder* the woman turns her past reality into a fantasy by simply denying it. The hero in *The Pornographers: An Introduction to Anthropology* is seen at the end of the film constructing an artificial woman (rubber but with “real hair”) because he finds the real thing so unsatisfactory. In *The History of Postwar Japan As Told By A Bar Hostess (Nippon Sengo Shi: Madamu Omboro No Seikatsu)* we have two narratives to follow, that of the newsreels the bar hostess is being shown and that of the bar hostess herself as she contradicts them, her version is the real one.

In addition to this fruitful confusion of illusion and reality there are those many scenes in Imamura’s films where the realistic scene could be illusionary. Several of these occur in *Vengeance is Mine*. The murderer, having dispatched the innkeeper, looks out of the window. Cut to a scene violently over-exposed which we watch resolve itself into a shot of the next-door graveyard. Until then we did not know there was a graveyard next door. We think the scene is a sudden (and for Imamura rare) subjective shot. It is only later that we begin to wonder if this is so.

In the next sequence the woman’s mother appears. She will certainly discover the body. He must therefore kill her as well. She starts up the stairs and he follows, in his hand the cord with which he will strangle her. On the right side of the frame is the stairway; on the left is an open corridor. As we

watch the two climb the stairs, someone enters from the corridor.

This is an impossibility; they are alone in the house. Then we see that it is the murderer's mother. An even greater impossibility, we know that she is at the other end of Japan. She passes from sight and the next shot shows her in a corridor. But it is the corridor of her own home, hundreds of miles away. What are we to make of this odd scene where the mother appears despite the restrictions of time and space? Asking Imamura elicits nothing. Alan Poul did, and the answer was: "I don't know. I just saw it that way." Nor can one explain the scene away as one did the shot of the over-exposed graveyard .

Yet, we can see that Imamura wants us to compare these two mothers, both about to die as it happens, though in different fashions. Or are they so different? Just as he killed one with a cord, he perhaps killed the other with his neglect. Yet this banal and sentimental thought is not at all Imamura-like. Besides, we have been shown that relations between murderer and mother are good, at least by comparison with those between him and his father. Maybe something else is involved-something like sympathetic magic.

This suggests itself during the final sequence of the film. Wife and father have had the executed murderer's remains cremated and now, carrying the remains (bits of bone), they are travelling to the top of a mountain in order to dispose of them, proper internment having been forbidden the murderer by the father himself. They are going to throw the remains away, bone by bone. (*Illus. 18*)

One by one they hurl the bones and one by one the bones stop dead, hanging there in the sky (freeze frame). More and more frantically the two throw the remains into the air. Finally they throw the box that contained the bones. It too (the final image of the film) stays there, hanging.

It seems as though Imamura is saying (and his so doing would support the Biblical quote he took for his title) that the evil we do lives after us. But this would be a strange observation from this director.

Magic: perhaps this is what we are being shown by this "scientific" director. And we remember other scenes of magic in his work. The wife in *The Pornographers* is convinced that her dead husband's soul inhabits the enormous carp she keeps in an aquarium. The various magic acts of the shaman in *The Profound Desire of the Gods* are all efficacious. One remembers too the primitive natives not only in this film but also in *Pigs and Battleships*, *The Insect Woman*, and *The Pornographers*, those who are, precisely, uncivilized if civilization means confirming to the constructs of society.

What Imamura is showing us is an industrial but tribal society, a nation of technologically advanced primitives. And he is claiming that this is the "real" Japan and that official Japan is illusionary. In this real world the bones of the criminal hang unburied in the air.

At this point, Poul asked the director about allegory - just how deliberate was it. "About half," answered Imamura.

Allegory, the narrative description of a subject under the guise of another suggestively similar, is never obvious in the Imamura film, but neither is it ever entirely absent.

Thus in the final scene of *Vengeance is Mine* the bones of villainous modern Japan refused to be disposed of. The man with no *kokoro* is here to stay because he is us. Thematically this is similar to another allegorical scene, that at the end of *The Profound Desire of the Gods*, where the mad shaman dances in front of the oncoming locomotive, the folk-spirit of Japan in all of its natural amorality will remain, no matter the modernity we affect.

The allegorical aspects of *Eijanaika* are equally strong. A man from Okinawa (island claimed by Japan, home of unspoiled "natives," also location for *The Profound Desire of the Gods*) kills a samurai. He then drains the blood from the body and uses it to paint the sail of the boat he wants to sail home in. The wind freshens and fills the red sail. There is a single shot of the rising sun seen through this blood-painted sail.

The rising sun is, of course, one of the political symbols of “official” Japan. It is being seen through what the Okinawan has called “the pig’s blood.” The scene is symbolic (allegorical) of the way that Okinawans, with reason, feel about the businessmen samurai of modern Japan.

Some have attempted to see in such scenes a concentrated political statement, as though Imamura were making a protest film of the sort specialized in by such directors as Tadashi Imai or Satsuo Yamamoto. There is a great difference, however. Imamura is toeing no party line. He is among the very few politically conscious Japanese directors who never joined the Communist Party and perhaps the only such director to have refused to countenance its claims.

Imamura is not telling us that the poor Okinawans are deserving. They are shown to be just as venal as anyone else and would be equally dangerous if they had the funds available to the samurai. The director never sentimentalizes, and he never makes more of misery than it deserves.

In an Imamura picture people get what they deserve, that is, what they ask for. Though the poor have a certain vitality, they have no ambition other than to enjoy life. If they do, like the heroine of *The Insect Woman*, they stop long before their ambitions are realized. At the end of the film she goes back to the farm, defeated. The hero of *The Pornographers* is literally cut adrift, so busy working on his artificial female that he does not notice that his boat workshop has become unmoored. The last we see of him he is adrift on the Pacific. The powerless thus choose their lack of power.

We see the process in all of the richness of its detail in *Eijanaika*, a panorama of the last days of the mid-19th-century Tokugawa era, when the world of power was being dismantled. In it we follow a number of stories: the girl passed from hand to hand; the repatriated seaman jailed because he, however involuntarily, left the country; the Okinawan whose family was killed by the Tokugawa authorities and who is thirsting for vengeance; the jockeying samurai who are trying to make as much money as possible in

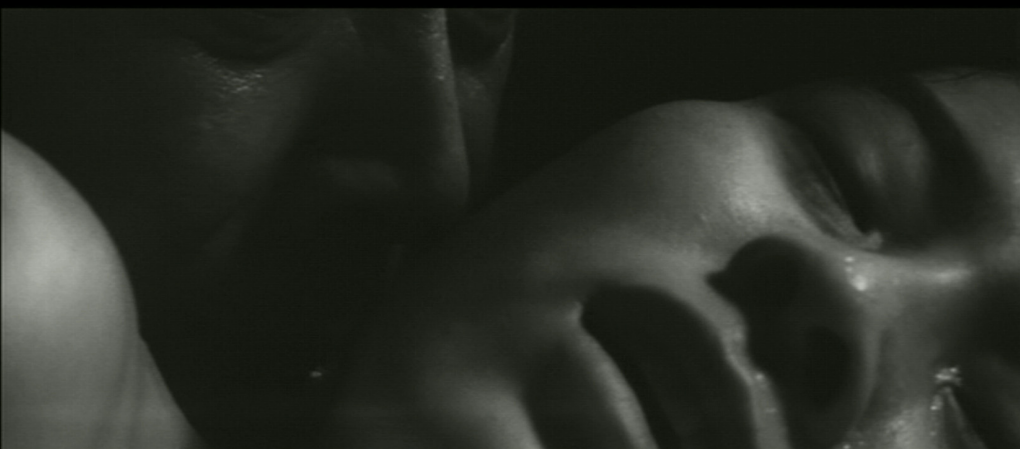
the little time left.

All of these anecdotes are shown in the context of Edo society coming apart. That strange dance-craze, the Eijanaika phenomenon, which sent sober folk reeling through the streets, is the bacchanalian background, the chanting hordes shouting their optimistic message. Eijanaika means in modern parlance, “Anything’s OK.”

As official Japan retreats, this dancing, shouting, singing “real” Japan takes over. Yet Imamura shows this as in no way a political victory. They will shortly be shunted again off to one side: the allegory is there but veiled. For comparison there is Nagisa Oshima’s *Dear Summer Sister (Natsu no Imoto)*, which is allegorical in a direct way. Here, the young man is Okinawa, and the visiting Tokyo girl looking for her “brother” is mainland Japan. Their troubled relationship precisely parallels that of Japan and its then recently regained island. In fact one can plot in their story the various political events which illustrate Japan’s continuing discriminatory attitude toward the whole Ryuku archipelago. Imamura’s allegorical intent is not that precise. It suggests rather than states. In *Vengeance is Mine* we must deduce that the anti-hero is modern Japan, and in *Eijanaika* we must infer that the subject is really ruthless power on one hand and feckless hedonism on the other.

The difference is greater than one of method - it is a difference in attitude, a difference that Imamura indicated when he told Audie Bock: “I am a country farmer, Oshima is a samurai.”

Here he is saying that he belongs (or wants to belong) to the various substrata he makes his films about. He implies that Oshima, graduate of Kyoto University, politically active intellectual, does not. Even though Oshima is concerned for the various minorities within Japan, he is not of their class. Neither, of course, is Imamura. The difference is that Imamura feels that he is and makes his films accordingly.



(III. 12 / 13) Tightly framed sex scenes transcending the frame in *Insect Woman*

Imamura said to Heiichi Sugiyama: “I want to make really human, Japanese, unsettling films.” He implies that the well-made, plotted, reconciling Japanese film is not really Japanese. Indeed, Imamura does not like the cinematically tidy. He has no use for plot, preferring a series of stories or if there is but one story then a chain of scenes only loosely interconnected. In addition he is not interested in character as the term is understood in the commercial cinema. His people rarely evolve; they are the same at the end of the film as they were at the beginning. The heroine of *The Insect Woman*, all the people in *Eijanaika*, they do not grow; that is, they do not change character, they remain themselves.

This they can do because they are whole, no one is fragmented or alienated in Imamura’s world. Everyone knows who she or he is and acts accordingly. There are many surprises in Imamura’s pictures but they are never those of character.

These people inhabit a world which is filled with vitality and they are so confident of themselves that their energy is enough, everything in the scene (and outside it as well) belongs to them.

Perhaps consequently the Imamura scene is packed with movement. Often it is tight, even crammed. This is particularly true of the love scenes, but it is also true of any intimate scene, conversations for example. Usually the scene is so full that parts of the people are cut off—that is, exist outside the frame. (*Illus. 12/13*)

This exclusion of parts of the characters (tops of heads, sides of bodies) is important. It implies that something exists outside what the director is showing, that the space beyond the frame is equally filled. The way that characters enter and leave the sides of the frame (and often the top and bottom as well) implies that this is a whole, teeming world we are watching.

Imamura suggests this in other ways as well. Within the frame itself, the two-dimensional surface we are viewing, the director often creates other

planes. One way is to put objects or people between the camera and the subject of the scene.

The love scene in *A Man Vanishes*, for example, finds the lovers initially all but invisible. In the foreground is an entire fishing family working and it takes some time to locate the man and the woman up in the corner. In the restaurant scene in *The Insect Woman*, there are so many levels of diners extending out of the frame that the viewer needs to do some searching to discover the couple to whom we are to give our attention. In the same film there is the final sequence where the dialogue scene is back in the upper corner of the frame, in the dark, while the foreground is entirely taken by the chanting farmers and their enormous string of prayer beads.

Such inconvenience has the effect of making us move closer, pay more attention. It also creates a special kind of intimacy and at the same time suggests energy, this mesh of movement through which they must be viewed.

Movement also often occurs when it has no plot value at all, though it has, of course, enormous atmospheric value. In *The Insect Woman*, during one of the scenes with the woman and her patron, we see through a window (upper left-hand corner of the frame) a whole party going on, a set, actors, all thrown away except for the enormous sense of movement that this tiny corner offers.

Eijanaika is filled with such windows of activity. In one scene, three of the officials are in a boat. The samurai opens one of the paper windows and there in the distance is an entire, enormous bridge, Ryogokubashi in old Edo, reconstructed for the film. He then closes the window, having indicated that seething and perhaps dangerous activity is occurring outside. Later, the officials are enjoying a meal and behind them, outside the window, far away, is the bridge, this time seen from an angle, filled with people, a living Hiroshige, again a small part of the scene but an important one, suggesting as it does the true heroes of the film, the people of Edo them-

selves in all their vitality.

If Imamura's space is crammed with action, his time is also jammed with event. Sometimes this is accomplished through composition, and sometimes through editing. In *The Insect Woman* a single multi-level, multi-action composition occurs again and again. This is the farmhouse interior. The family is on the right. They are balanced by an open door on the left. This in turn gives way to another room in which there is another door. Further away yet another door. Various actions occur on right and left, far and close, all at the same time, and multiple actions collapse space at the same time that they telescope time. (Illus. 14-16)

In *Vengeance is Mine*, there is the scene where the son comes home and confronts his father and his wife. The camera is outside in the corridor, shooting through the glass windows of the inner doors. The corridor runs, as it often does in old Japanese houses, right around the inner room, and the glass doors on the further side are open. The father sits and tries to reason with his criminal son, the wife sits by his side, both immobile. The son, however, roams as he talks. He leaves by one door, saunters around the corridor, thus becoming invisible to us, and enters again, still talking, by the other door. He is the only moving object in the scene. He indicates his freedom. The father is sitting so that there is a flaw in the glass between him and the camera. Thus his slight movements seem to distort his face. He indicates his guilt.

More usually, Imamura collapses time through editing. In *The Insect Woman* whole weeks are put into three cuts. The heroine's mixed-blood child pulls the hot soup cauldron over and is scalded to death, cut to a detail of her body, cut to her mother crying, but she is now at one of the new religion centres: weeks have passed.

Later, one of the characters is in the hospital. After a conversation is finished, there is a cut to precisely the same scene, or what appears to be. The

only way we know differently is that the lighting has changed. Again, another character comes in and there is a slight conversation. The same day, a week later? We have no idea.

Again in *Vengeance is Mine*, the boy (to grow up into the criminal) has just seen his father humiliated by the military. The child sits facing the sea in full sunlight. Cut to precisely the same scene but the time is night. The child is still there—a whole section of time has been visibly collapsed. Sometimes the cutting is such that time is questioned. This is often accomplished through ordinary flashbacks and occasional flash-forwards. In *A Man Vanishes*, however, there are several examples of cutting which contrast film time with psychological time and at the same time speed the film itself forward.

One is the scene where two of the characters are talking about the telephone calls, presumably made by the elder sister. In between them suddenly appears the camera. They move aside to make room for it. We then cut to what the camera is seeing. It is seeing the telephone and with simple-minded directness it dollies right up to it. In two cuts we have substituted an observed documentary time for a subjective camera time.

Imamura's television films are filled with leap-frogging temporal sequences which swiftly forward them. The first part of *A Search for Soldiers Who Did Not Return* (*Mikikan-hei o Otte*) begins with aerial pictures of Malaysia and then cuts directly into the first interview. This kind of cutting is unthinkable on Japanese television, where an amount of local colour before beginning the business at hand is so common as to be almost a rule.

Later on in the same TV film, the space between interviews is always left out. One interview is cut directly into the next and there is no introduction of the interviewed. It becomes clear who is who in the following sequences, but Imamura initially makes no attempt to establish a continuity—all is forward movement.

In *The History of Post-war Japan As Told By A Bar Hostess* there is even less ordinary chronology. Interview, film clip, interview, film clip. The interviews are held in many different locations and with many different people. Again no attempt is made to situate the viewer in time. Rather one section of the film pushes the other off the screen.

Vengeance is Mine is filled with temporal short cuts. The body of the first murder victim is found in an empty field; cut to a helicopter and then pan down to the field now swarming with police. A few scenes later the murderer is shown in a truck with his next victim; cut to the helicopter and the murder field; cut to the murderer in a train looking out as the train passes the field.

These scenes go by so fast and push the chronology at such a pace that one does not at the same time even notice all those scenes left out in between. Later we see a ball game on TV; cut to outside the stadium itself as the crowd leaves, pan down to the evening paper with the murderer's picture in it; cut to a boat and his fake suicide attempt. We have gone all the way to the stadium to learn that the police know who the murderer is and then we are miles and days distant and the effect of this (the fake suicide to throw the cops off the trail) is shown.

Later, at the inn, a guest is angry because the girl he ordered hasn't appeared. Cut to the whorehouse where a reason (the girls are afraid of the old woman) is given, but more attention is paid to the TV they are watching; cut to one of the girls looking at the set and recognizing the murderer's face in a police announcement. The pattern of cutting seems erratic but it has established all we need to know and done it in the least possible time.

Sometimes Imamura will, instead of cutting, swiftly cram all we need to know into a single travelling shot—one filled with spatial motion, though the temporal value is constant. A spectacular example is that composed of two

end-to-end travelling shots in *Vengeance is Mine*.

The first shows the murderer going to a new town. We are in the train with him. The scene is filled with passengers getting ready to get off, the station sliding into view. When the murderer also alights, the camera goes right with him, staying just behind as he traverses the platform, goes through the wicket, leaves the station and gets into a taxi. Cut to the taxi stopping in a small street.

The second begins at once. He gets out, pays, goes up the street, the camera following him as he turns and goes through a gate, through a garden, into the entry of the inn, through the windows of which we see the mistress playing mahjong, then up the stairs with him and into the second-floor room which will be his.

Though no time has been elided, the frame has been so filled with motion that the sequences seem very short though they are actually relatively long. They have pushed us into the chronology and made us feel its urgency. These are then some of the ways in which Imamura uses space and time to create the impression of an overflowing vitality which bursts the confines of both frame and chronology.

There is one further manner in which Imamura enlarges the screen, suggests unseen extensions and implies a hidden wholeness. It consists of the sudden intrusion of something unexpected, it is a surprise, and it suggests a teeming, burgeoning world which has erupted into view.

One such example would be the collapsible restaurant in *A Man Vanishes*. Another would be the bones hanging in air at the end of *Vengeance is Mine*. In *The Insect Woman*, the heroine is walking with her child, and the slow pan reveals strange, unrecognizable shapes in the background, it is only as the scene progresses that we realize they are walking past lines of American bombers at a local U.S. Air Force base.

Toward the beginning of *A Man Vanishes* there is a long pan shot of the woman and the interviewer walking. The background is blank white and then something like an airplane goes by, then something like an elephant. It is only later that we realize that the scene is actually a travelling shot and we are seeing oddly shaped rocks against a snow-covered beach.

Eijanaika has a number of such scenes, all suggesting an enormous and hidden vitality. A huge crowd is confronting the government's soldiers and the local whores have indicated their contempt of the soldiery by urinating directly in front of them. The next scene is from above. The lines of soldiers are at the bottom of the screen, separated from the crowd (the entire top of the screen) by the roofs of two long, rectangular pavilions which appear as bands about one-third from the bottom of the frame.

The crowd is surging like the sea and then a wave of humans scrambles over the pavilion. It gives way under the weight, crashes, and the crowd swarms over it and up to the roof of the scend, which in turn collapses. This too the people engulf as they advance to the bottom of the frame, forcing the soldiers down and out of sight. We know what is happening and why, but the scene is shown us in such a way that it becomes both a metaphor for vital, natural forces, and an amazing invasion of energy from outside.

Perhaps the most extraordinary of such scenes occurs in the final reel of *Vengeance is Mine*. Father and wife are in a cable car going to the top of the mountain. In his lap is the white-cloth-covered urn holding the cremated criminal. It is a prosaic scene. The viewer senses the film is nearly over. We await the coda and the conclusion.

It is just at this relaxed moment that Imamura most surprises us. Before describing this shot, however, one should first describe its effect. Father and wife are sitting on the bench beside the car. Outside is the panorama of mountains and forest, seeming to descend because the cable car is coming up. The camera is as far from them as it can get, which is not far because of


the narrowness of the cable car. Nonetheless, a wide-angle lens is used and there is considerable space around them. It is into this space that suddenly appears a rectangle, huge, which moves swiftly from the upper left-hand corner of the frame to the lower right, its traversal taking only a matter of seconds. It is behind the father and the wife and is outside the car but it is composed entirely of bodies and faces: they all are standing, all wearing the same white robes, all looking at us, and all are women. We have time to register only this before the apparition slides from view and the camera pivots to explain. (*Illus.17*)

It is, of course, the other cable car, one goes down as the other goes up, and they hence pass each other. We have just seen the passing-a group of female pilgrims, having visited the shrine undoubtedly at the top of the mountain. They are standing because there are no seats and they are looking out and so, naturally, at us.

Everything is explicable-indeed; everything is explained before this short scene is over. Yet the effect is extraordinary. We know the hero is dead, we know they are taking the ashes somewhere, and suddenly angels, even fallen angels, since they are going down the mountain. This would be a Western Christian interpretation, but even without it the scene seems supernatural.

This small scene prepares us for the magic to come, because magic is what we are about to see when shortly the bones will hang in the mountain air. At the same time we have seen a kind of fullness, a kind of vitality which suggests something transcendental.

These burgeoning, inexplicable scenes are as full of the unknown, the unknowable just as surely as is the famous vase at the end of Ozu's *Late Spring*. Both scenes are, in a way, containers - holders for something frankly visionary, something transcendental.



When Imamura said, "I want to make messy films," he was implying (to Alan Poul) that he did not want to make the ordinary, crafted, plotted picture. When Poul later added that "superficially, the film's structures mirror the disorder that besets his downtrodden characters' lives, but the closer one studies them the more they reveal a consistency of internal dramatic structure matching that of any classic 'well-made film,'" he was affirming that though the films may appear spontaneous, this is the result of much planning.

Like Ozu (the director whom Imamura recently told me is one of the two strongest influences on his work, the other being Yuzo Kawashima), he works hardest over the script. He often appears as co-author and, even when he does not, one may be sure that nonetheless the script is at least partially his.

I asked him if he had ever (like most directors) had to work on a script which did not interest him. He answered no but that there were some which initially did not. *Vengeance is Mine* was one such.

"The script was brought to me because I had been making documentaries and they thought this would make an interesting one. But I was no longer interested in documentaries. Still, I read the story, and as I read I rewrote. A result was that I started to interest myself in it. And once I had decided to film it, then it became very interesting to me."

Imamura's way of working is that once he has finished the script to his satisfaction it becomes the blueprint for the film. I asked how much he departed from it while shooting. Very little he said, guessing, maybe three percent. That means, he said, "that ninety-seven percent of the picture is just as I wrote it." Script finished, filming begins. Almost always he shoots as chronologically as possible, first holding a general rehearsal at the site or on the set.

This, says Robert Tranchin, technical adviser and an assistant director on *Eijanaika*, to whom I am indebted for much of the following information, is casual to an extreme. “The actors move around more or less as they want to while Imamura and Shinsaku Himeda, the cameraman, plot their shots. When the rehearsal is finished most of the shots for the scene have been planned.”

Imamura thinks of his shots as falling into two categories. These are the *hikisoto* (from the outside) and the *hikuichi* (from the inside). The latter is a conventional shot, the camera inside the room or area, with the actors. The former, one we associate with Imamura, is a shot through an open door, through a window, or is a scene where something is between the actors and the camera.

The nature of the site or the set determines to an extent which shot is to be used. “The decision is made not in the script but on the set, once I have seen the actors in it,” Imamura told me. “A lot of the decision depends upon the way the set is made, but a lot of it is psychological as well. I always have to think of who is seeing this, who is doing the viewing. And putting the camera outside and letting it peer in gives a kind of intimacy that no other shot can.”



(III. 14-16) Multi-level, multi-action compositions in *Insect Woman*

“In *Eijanaika* I was really making a ‘documentary’ period film. I am more like historian than a reporter, except that I am not interested in the leaders and the battles. I want to know what people thought and felt, you might say, not how they acted but how they reacted. Anyway, this film is all about spying, so it is quite voyeuristic, and that makes it especially intimate.”

Once the nature of the shot is determined, camera rehearsals follow. Imamura himself never checks the shot, never looks through the camera view finder. He would if he were working with a new cameraman, he said, but his trust in Himeda, with whom he has made the majority of his pictures, is so great that all framing is left to him.

Occasionally, says Tranchin, Himeda will tell the director that, say, the left side of the frame is a bit empty. Then Imamura will have some extras walk through in the distance or will plant a tree or a shrub. “On the set of *Eijanaika* we had a whole nursery. When a tree was needed we went and got it and planted it for the scene.”

There are often five or more movement rehearsals with actors blocking out their movements following conferences with director and cameraman. After this come camera rehearsals, again five or more. Here the director watches the actors - to whom he has not yet given a word of actual direction.

“Imamura,” says Tranchin, “allows his actors to interpret. Then he strips away the excess. This is, by definition, anything he does not like. He leaves, he says, the original interpretation, but that means that he has revealed it. He does not generate a performance but neither does he reduce it to nothing. In this way he is not like Ozu who created his actors’ performances. Rather, Imamura takes what he finds and pares it down. You might say that he ‘respects’ his actors, or, at least, his characters.”

It is this method of shooting which accounts for much of the unobtrusive excellence of the acting in an Imamura film. It also accounts for the ex-

traordinarily high shooting ratio, which is about thirty percent. That is, he uses in the finished film less than a third of the amount of the film he shot. “At first sight,” wrote critic Nick Bornoff, on the open set of *Eijanaika*, “Imamura’s direction seems quiet, unobtrusive, but his overall manner has an authoritative dignity which commands respect. The man who stands there chain-smoking, seeming merely to watch the proceedings, is nonetheless instantly recognizable: the puppet master who sits in the audience at the same time.”

Scene after scene is filmed, sequences are roughly edited, and at the end of filming the picture exists in a nearly complete form. Editing is for Imamura much like directing, but now instead of actors he has reels of film he must cut down and must make reveal their essence. For this reason editing takes a long time. It took a year to write the script for *Eijanaika*, half a year to shoot it and three months to edit it.

Imamura is, he says, very careful in his editing. He uses (“just like Ozu”) only the straight cut. Fades and dissolves are almost as rare in his work as they are in the older director’s. But this single cut must come at the right place. He will worry for hours over a single placement.

All of this is, of course, the opposite of messy filmmaking. But when Imamura said he wanted to make messy films he did not mean that he wanted to make them messily. Rather, with all the art that conceals art, he wanted to create the impression of the vitality and burgeoning fertility which is the mess in which we live.

Talking with Audie Bock, Imamura indicated the Yokohama skyline and pointed out a modern skyscraper that had on its roof an ancient Shinto shrine. “You may think all this is real,” he said, pointing to the modern city. “But to me it is all illusion. The reality is those little shrines, the superstition and

irrationality that pervade the Japanese, under this veneer of business suits and advanced technology.”

Imamura’s belief in this keeps him from being depressed when he regards the human mess. “I am not a pessimist,” he said, “and the Japanese are very stubborn.” They will long retain this primitive centre of irrationality and Imamura’s strength is that he sees this and celebrates it.

Other Japanese have also seen this, the primitive in the blue serge suit, but they have deplored it. Few Japanese directors have viewed and approved, though Ozu and Kawashima are certainly among them. Most have succumbed to the idea that the Japanese must become Western, that they must leave behind their tribal background and become citizens of the world, or the like. Imamura, however, finds the refusal, the stubbornness of his characters admirable precisely because it is this primitive naturalness, still maintained even now, that is responsible for the wholeness which many Japanese still exhibit. Imamura is no friend to the West because he is no friend to any system which does not foster this admirable wholeness, be it the old Tokugawa repressive ways, or the new Western ways. One is the way of dictatorship by oligarchy; the other is dictatorship by mass marketing. These are much the same (one of the themes of *Eijanaika*) and are equally destructive.

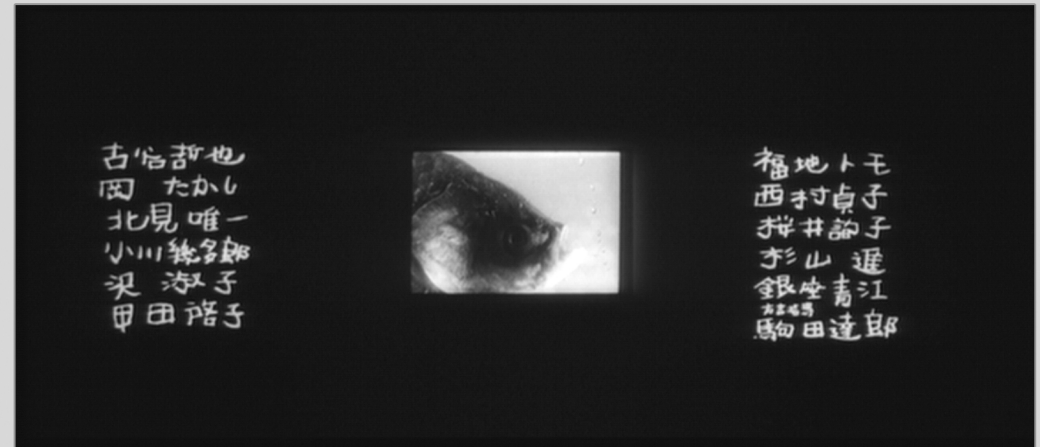
Fortunately, he says, this ur-Japan still exists. Though feckless, filled with a frivolous *matsuri* spirit, it nonetheless (or consequently) lives in accord, even now, with the natural world, what is left of it. Imamura himself does not. He is an intellectual, a gentleman farmer, but he allows us to see and to share his *hikisoto* view, spying on life itself.



(III. 17 / 18) The sudden intrusion of the magic, the supernatural the inexplicable in *Vengeance is Mine*

Visual Interlude II

The Art of Framing Voyeurism in *The Pornographers*



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2



3



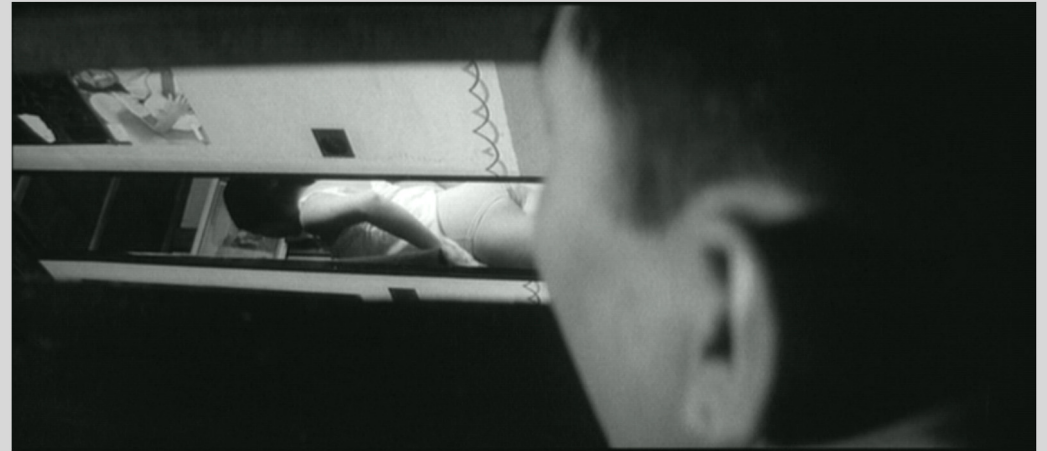
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Above:

- 4 Voyeuristic point of view from outside
- 5 Cut to intimate inside close-up of the same shot

> *Opposite page:*

- 6/7: Frame in frame compositions with and without viewer mimick the scope format effectively to indicate, that cinema is voyeuristic per se.
- 8: The daughter, object of her stepfather's voyeurism (in 7), spies on a conversation between her mother and stepfather.

< *Previous page:*

- 1 The film begins with a film-in-film construction initiated by a Super-8 projection of a pornographic home-movie.
- 2 Watched by "the pornographers" (reverse-shot in super-8 framing)
- 3 Zoom into the super-8 picture on screen simulates a format change to scope which marks the beginning of the "real fiction". The modalities of what is real are blurred right from the beginning of the film.



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Opposite page:

9/10: Impossible auctorial perspective: "Across the Street" - voyeurism. All compositions resemble the rectangular scope format.

11/12: Interiors on the backside of houses seen from the middle of the river.

13: A quarrel between stepson and stepfather about money. The orthogonal division of the frame visualizes the distance between them and heightens the impression of intruding a private sphere for the spectator.



14



17



15



18



16

< Opposite page:

The ghost of the dead husband incarnated by a carp watches his wife's moves from beyond:

14: "From-the-outside"-shot of conversation with the carp in the center of the frame.

15: Reverse angle shot of the same scene, now seen from the subjective point of view of the carp.

16: The wife dying in a mental institution is watched by her relatives, and her "carp-husband", who's waiting in "heaven" for her to join him.

Above:

17/18: Guilt, shame and the resulting fears expressed by expressionistic shadow patterns



19



21



20

Above:

Otherworldly voyeurism.

19: The mother of the film's hero is watching her son from the gate of paradise.

20: The husband of the heroine is doing the same from the gates of hell.

> Opposite page:

21: Driven mad by her husband's otherworldly jealousy and the hardships of the world, the heroine bids farewell after mistaking her husband for the Buddha to retreat into the realm of madness at a window of the asylum.

22/23: And finally joins her late husband by literally climbing the Jacob's ladder.



22



23



SHOHEI IMAMURA: Modern Japan's Entomologist

By Max Tessier

"I was drinking sake while writing the script (of The Insect Woman) when I noticed an insect incessantly circling my ashtray. I thought to myself that my character found herself in somewhat of the same situation, and so I chose the title Konchuki (Entomology)."

- Shohei Imamura

Oddly enough, Shohei Imamura is little known in France. He is nevertheless a very important filmmaker whose work allows one to discover what is characteristic of the Japanese, their most fundamental quality. Imamura's personal approach to the complex reality of modern and intimate Japan makes him one of the most remarkable directors of his generation. His body of work, though limited, (thirteen films in twenty years) reveals a unique interest in characters from Japan's poor, in their primitive energy; something quite in opposition to the traditional Japanese image of polite and refined individuals from "good families." In this way, it becomes rather obvious that as a young assistant director at Shochiku, Imamura was in no way influenced by Ozu. At Nikkatsu during the Fifties, he was however, influenced by Yuzo Kawashima, author of the studio's famous baroque and nonsensical comedies, for whom Imamura worked as both an assistant, then co-scriptwriter. Later, at Shochiku, Imamura was influenced by his friend Yoshitaro Nomura.

From very early on, Imamura, whose training was quite different from that of Shochiku filmmakers (Nagisa Oshima, Yoshida, Masahiro Shinoda), was as deliberately un-intellectual as possible; he showed an interest in every term

thing marginal, or at least in anything not associated with Japanese literary and aristocratic culture. In other words, the “heroes” of his first film *Stolen Desire* (*Nusumareta Yokujo*), are part-time actors in a popular travelling Kabuki troupe that roams across the Kansai region. The troupe’s presence in the villages causes some trouble before they achieve a completely unexpected triumph at the end of the film. This film, whose topic and rhythmic music by Toshiro Mayuzumi in advertently evoke early Fellini, in particular *The White Sheik* and *La Strada*, is filled with furtive, funny and grotesque notations no doubt inherited from Kawashima. His directing reveals a consistently inventive dynamism that foreshadows the rhythm of *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta To Gunkan*). One can already detect the tremendous physical resilience and un-conforming vitality of Imamura’s women as they battle men’s brutal sexual desire. As well, one already perceives a constituent element of Imamura’s later work: a pronounced interest in rural Japan, where an “authenticity” not found in the Japanese megalopolis, endures. The characters speak a regional dialect which is in fact, their linguistic “identity card” (in this case the “Kansai-Ben” or Kansai dialect, from the Osaka region). During a period of approximately ten years when Imamura is directing films on a regular basis (from *Stolen Desire* to *Profound Desire of the Gods* (*Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo*), he centres his films around provincial people, most of whom have emigrated to the city and whose energy stems from a primary education; they are quite unlike the characters in most contemporary Japanese films.

Beginning with his third film, *Endless Desire* (*Hateshinaki Yokubo*), Imamura, and Himeda his cameraman, with whom he will continue to collaborate from this point on, create a rather “expressionist” visual style of shadow and light, using highly contrasted lighting to emphasize dramatic situations. Breaking with the style of *Stolen Desire*, Imamura instead makes use here of rather lengthy shots that follow a slow rhythm. This is a way of creating a very dramatic atmosphere, one that borders on oneirism and surrealism, characteristic of Imamura’s subsequent films. As for the theme, the

“entomologist” is not simply a formula since a majority of the film takes place in an underground passage dug by a group of people brought together by the lure of financial gain; there they search for bags of morphine buried by Americans at the end of the war. The characters become insects with human heads whose energy is entirely directed toward monetary gain and the desire for power. Primitive and perfectly “vulgar,” it is obvious that these instinct-driven men and women speak the Osaka dialect, considered the language of uneducated peasants, nothing more than a means of crude and simple communication. The film concludes with an astounding sequence: one stormy night while all the small fry are busy killing one another, the woman in the group, having played her cards right, steals away with the bags of morphine, only to fall into the river and perish. Imbued with indomitable pessimism, Imamura aesthetically transcends what might be viewed as a film with a lesson, a kind of “moral of the story.” Though the film’s message could today be considered a little obvious or even a kind of tattle-tale, it remains an intelligent critique of the rapaciousness driving post-war Japan, a Japan filled with “pigs” where everything has a price. In this case, drugs symbolize perhaps the “American evil,” something Imamura denounces in his other films.

This unflattering portrait of Japan is completed with even more vigour by the very “Imamurian” *Pigs and Battleships*, where the author’s major themes are exposed through grotesque symbolism. This work is much in contrast to the realism of his previous film, *The Second Brother* (*Nianchan*), a commissioned work addressing a social issue in a mining town of Kyushu, a film topic undoubtedly better suited for Urayama, for whom Imamura wrote a similar script three years later (*The Street with the Cupola*) which was considerably “lyricised” by its humanist director. When *Pigs and Battleships* (released in France with the more “commercial” title *Girls and Gangsters*) was released, the film was noticed for its fanatical “anti-Americanism,” associated with the fight against the well-known Japanese-American Security Treaty. Yet, it obviously surpasses such a description and is somewhat of a parable of modern Japan; the country was given over to the “pigs”

when the Japanese became corrupted by the materialistic and venal American “battleships.” The parallel destinies of Haruko (Jitsuko Yoshimura), the young prostitute working for the marines at the U.S. base in Yokosuka, and Kinta (Hiroyuki Nagato) her pimp, who joins a group of gangsters, are representative of Imamura’s characters through their attitude and inexhaustible energy. Around Yokosuka’s red light district, the couple, linked by sex and money, always attempts to flee, yet without ever managing to escape. At the end, after Kinta’s death, Haruko, left all alone, regains her independence. Despite an almost naturalist mise-en-scene filled with baroque and grotesque elements, *Pigs and Battleships* symbolically expresses Imamura’s ambiguous feelings towards a society he likens to a pig sty. During the famous final sequence, Imamura shows hundreds of pigs, frightened by the gunshots from both bands of gangsters, wherein one perceives a caricature of the capitalist system in Japan, since these gangsters are in fact two factions of the same economic group. The pigs run through the neon-lit streets of Yokosuka, while Kinta becomes a victim of his own scheming; he dies in a desperate exchange of gunfire. This highly typical script, certainly one of his most audacious scripts (co-written with Hisashi Yamauchi), is superbly directed and owes a lot to Himeda’s camera work. Himeda employs a telephoto lens, not to be innovative, but to increase or decrease the distance between the camera and the characters, according to the context of the situation. The critic Yamada Koichi writes, quoting Haruko “When she leaves her neighbourhood saying: ‘Wherever I go, it can’t get worse,’ the scene, filmed with a super telephoto lens, gains its impressive character through a kind of removal of spatial distance, such that the foreground reveals the character’s interiorization: on her face we see all at once, will, hope and sadness.” Refusing to resign himself to an alienated fate, Haruko leaves for Kawasaki to work in a factory, quite an un-idealistic conclusion, and in complete contrast to other films of the time.

Haruko is then the first “prototype” of the Imamura heroine whose vitality and endurance secure a new independence, however fleeting it may be. Before Tomé (*The Insect Woman*) and Sadako (*Intentions of Murder*), Haruko



Hogs and Battleships (*Buta to gunkan*, 1961)

is among those women without ties who have left their village and their family to live their lives, and consequently, they are more or less marginalized by society. In real life, Imamura was often involved with such women. His notion of “women” is no longer simply that of “wife and mother,” an immutable status of the Japanese woman, but of a woman freed from the family shackles that uses her body intuitively as a way of revealing her liberty. Not surprising then, is Imamura’s interest in the vitality of the actresses of his films. He went against the tide of Japan’s star-system, avoiding for example Masumura’s actresses.

“INSECT WOMAN” IN ACTION

After two years of underlying conflict with Nikkatsu during which time Imamura produced a play “Paraji” (“Gods and Pigs”) the company ended up providing him with the financing for another film, *Entomology* (*Konchuki*), whose title changed to *Entomological Chronicles of Japan* (*Nippon Konchuki*), then to *The Insect Woman* once it was released outside of Japan. The fate of Tomé is symptomatic of the Imamura heroine and is carefully noted as part of Japan’s contemporary history; all throughout the film, milestone dates appear (August, 1945, May 1st, 1952, April/May, 1960). Played by Sachiko Hidari, Tome is a country girl, sent to the city by her family to be a servant, though she becomes a prostitute and eventually organizes a “Prostitutes’ Union” in Tokyo. In the end, her own daughter, Nobuko (Jitsuko Yoshimura, Haruko from *Pigs and Battleships*), outmatches and eventually rejects her. The outline of the coming *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* is already visible: like “Madam Omboro,” Tomé symbolizes the value of the female commoner in Japan, involuntarily caught up in the country’s official history, fighting not to become its victim: an example of “anti-history.” In this case, what is even more underscored is the film’s avowed entomological element; it glorifies in its own way the inalienable virtues of the Japanese common folk: patience, endurance, vitality and resistance to the trials and tribulations of life in a country spoiled

by a Damoclean nature. The unrelenting Japanese insect fascinates Imamura (who always shoots insects with a telephoto lens). Imamura asks himself a key question posed by several filmmakers and intellectuals of the time: “How can one be Japanese?” or even “What is it to be Japanese?” In his later films, these questions recur, are examined in depth and are always linked to the problem of social identity. Imamura, however, examines the question differently than do the more “intellectual” filmmakers like Hiroshi Teshigahara and Nagisa Oshima. Nevertheless, the essential theme is still woman’s vital instinct and her astounding ability to adapt to a generally unfavourable context.

In *Intentions of Murder* one of his longest, most ambitious, and detailed films, Imamura goes even further in presenting a marginal situation, this time in an adaptation of a Shinji Fujiwara short story. Always passionate about the Japanese provinces, Imamura shifts the action from a neighbourhood of Shinjuku (Tokyo) to Sendai, a large city almost 250 km northeast of Tokyo. In a shanty wooden Japanese house found along the railway is an average couple; the woman, Sadako, a stocky country girl whose beauty and intellect are not particularly remarkable, leads a quiet life entirely devoted to her husband and her adopted son. One night a thief, attracted to Sadako’s muted animality, intrudes and rapes her before escaping at dawn. This incident triggers a transformation in Sadako’s dull life: revealing Sadako to herself and to her body. Accustomed to her husband’s rough ways, she cannot believe that a man could desire her. As the film progresses, moving between realism and surrealism, the attachment Sadako feels for the rapist, a trumpeter with a heart condition, grows. Although she wants to halt this attachment, she cannot tell her husband. She ends up following this strange man, with the intention of killing him and then committing suicide to erase her shame, so that she will “no longer be unhappy.” In fact, Sadako does not really know what she wants and hesitates especially to break off her social ties and leave with the stranger. Imamura expresses this symbolically in the surprisingly dreamlike scene of empty tramways, where Sadako, present and absent, plunges into the subconscious.

The more the film progresses, the more the dream sequence plays an important part, as a way of expressing a powerless reality. The train, also a symbol of male desire, scene with Sadako's dreamlike tumble into the ocean and nothingness recalls, and no doubt deliberately refers to, certain Bunuel sequences. When Sadako and Hiraoka (the rapist) venture onto the icy mountain after the train en route to Tokyo is blocked by snow, they are followed by the library secretary who is also the husband's mistress. Imamura knowingly takes up universal melodramatic conventions and increases their dreamlike quality and eclipsed desire. Another typical melodramatic scene takes place in the tunnel; Hiraoka has another heart attack, Sadako hands him a cup of poison instead of his medicine, but at the last moment spills it. However, Imamura adds a surreal dimension to the scene, devoid of any possible moral connotations. The ending is ambiguous, the husband no longer has any proof that his wife is guilty and, everything is back in order, yet the sense of normalcy in place is an innovative way of mocking morality because Sadako, in fact has triumphed in spite of her serious physical and intellectual shortcomings. She lived an adventure she would have thought impossible and discovered a new sense of freedom in her sexual relations with a man who had raped her. This view of "women's liberation" only shocks orthodox feminists who believe that men do nothing but enslave women. Once again, Imamura lovingly and patiently observes his "insect women," while instead, Teshigahara watches the evolution of his *Woman in the Dunes* (*Suna No Onna*).

SEX AND DISAPPEARANCE: THE LIFEblood OF HAPPINESS

Developing this method in the first film released from his own production company (founded in 1965 following differences with Nikkatsu), Imamura adapts a "scandalous" novel by the author Akiyuki Nosaka: *Introduction to Anthropology* (*Jinruigaku Nyumon*), better known outside of Japan as *The Pornographers*. Originally, Imamura was only to write the script. It presents two critiques of Japanese society; of a society policed, and of a society repressed. In a sense, the film is a plea, an imploration for sexual pleasure,

something often refused to the Japanese. The hero is Ogata, known as "Subu" (Shoichi Ozawa), a merchant of pornographic material who supplies a variety of sex toys and even false virgins to happy customers who come to visit him in a popular neighbourhood of Osaka. This story about an illegitimate family abandoning itself to every sexual excess is once again a splendid occasion for Imamura to accumulate "grotesque" and caricatured details; it recalls the protagonists of the play "Paraji" where consanguinity reigned. More and more, Imamura and his cameraman, Himeda, adopt an ostensibly voyeuristic style in black-and-white Cinema-Scope, where the camera's field is constantly filled with a multitude of objects, windows, sliding partitions, etc. The sound is sometimes distorted or used in a neorealist manner, as is the case in the overexposed oneiric scene at the hospital when Hanu, in a bout of hysteria mistakes Ogata for Buddha and bellows from behind her window's bars under which gathers a crowd of curious onlookers, a superb expressionist display of madness, a public spectacle watched by members of a society divided between fascination and repulsion. The end of the film, in a kind of a counter-moral, is quite famous. Ogata, whose family has been "shattered" (the son ran off with a prostitute and Keiko, the daughter, left to run a beauty salon) devotes himself to building an absolutely perfect doll while living in a floating house that accidentally becomes unmoored and floats away without Subu even noticing, so engrossed as he is in his masterpiece. This takes up (in a semi-parody manner) the theme of an "island of paradise," a theme Imamura tackles two years later with his last big production at Nikkatsu entitled *The Profound Desire of the Gods*. With this film, he completes his geographic and mental journey in the Ryukyu archipelago at the southern tip of Japan, whose primitive islands could still represent a return to nature for a hyper-civilized society.

Yet, when Imamura shoots *A Man Vanishes* he backtracks somewhat since he admits the project was partly inspired by the confessions of a model on the set of *The Insect Women*. The theme of physical disappearance is relatively common in Japan's labyrinth of streets, but rarely has it been addressed in such a way in cinema, let alone treated as fantastic fiction, if only



Historical events in *Insect Woman* (May 1st, 1952 Bloody Worker's Day - 1959 Ise Bay Typhoon - June 1960 Anti-AMPO Struggle)

as fodder Teshigahara's adaptations of Kobo Abe's novels. *A Man Vanishes* is no doubt Imamura's most personal and "experimental" film. In this investigative piece, Imamura seen with his crew on film, continues to study surrealism in a society resembling a hive of activity where anything can happen. Based on real disappearance cases and on "missing persons" (pronounced "johatsu") police files of persons vanished into the big cities, where such occurrences are more frequent than anywhere else in the world, the film presents itself as an investigation during which an interviewer questions friends and family of a certain Mr. Oshima in order to find out the reasons for his prolonged absence. At this moment the director enters the scene, believing Oshima's mother will speak to him, after she refused to speak to a professional detective conducting a real investigation.

Imamura believes he can literally "unearth" the missing Oshima. The filmmaker's intervention is a distancing element of "*cinema-verité*" Imamura refuses to cheat with this ambiguous concept, which in fact masks another kind of manipulation. Evidently, the investigation allows Imamura and his crew to travel across Japan, from Hokkaido, where the family of the missing man lives, to various locations where the man had passed through. A highly prized style of filming in the Sixties, "*cinema-verité*" is used here not only as a new means of investigating social reality, but also as a way in which to downplay a new illusion: after two hours of inquiry with Oshima's immediate family, among it his mistresses and Yoshie a "secret fiancée," the film leads to a veritable dismantling of the notion of "truth." When the room where Yoshie and her eldest sister Sayo (accused of poisoning Mr. Oshima) is really dismantled and revealed to the trapped protagonists and the voyeuristic spectators as a studio set where the film crew has been tracking down the characters of a staged investigation. The classic "Brechtian distance" is pushed to its furthest limits as Imamura refuses to consider cinema as a privileged medium for arriving at the truth. Rather, it becomes a means of communication between the crew and characters of an authentic drama, as he publicly recognizes his failure to discover an "objective truth." For his part, the missing man remains unfound, assuming his own fate, and

denying the positive role of investigative film.

Despite a foreseeable commercial failure, Imamura used this new approach to reality in his *A History of Postwar Japan as told by a Bar Hostess*, where “Madam Omboro” recounts her life as a barmaid and prostitute in Yokosuka during, and despite, Japan’s tumultuous political history from 1945 to 1970. Less original than *A Man Vanishes*, perhaps based too much on the confessions of a chatty character, the film is nevertheless one of an “energetic woman,” sensual and independent, as created by the author. The film also draws on the theme of Japan’s “evasion,” previously addressed and again subsequently with the “exotic” prostitutes of *The Making of a Prostitute* (*Karayuki-San*).

TO THE ROOTS OF THE JAPANESE “HOMO LUDENS”

In the meantime, Imamura seemed to have played his “last card” with Nikkatsu after making the longest and perhaps the most revealing film of his brief career: *Profound Desire of the Gods* (*Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo*). For Imamura, this film represented the ultimate exploration of both “the origins of the Japanese” and of a semi-primitive society where a playful notion of life still existed. A notion, of course, much in contrast to modern Japanese society as the filmmaker sees it: highly ordered and obsessed with working. In this slow and very long “fictional documentary,” Imamura sets industrial Japanese society, represented by the engineer Kariya who has come to prepare the construction of an airport, against the primitive, animist, superstitious and still “mythological” Japan (here the priestess questions “the desires of the gods”) of the Southern Island of Kuragejima; here lives an incestuous family dominated by an omnipotent patriarch, Yamanori. He chained his son, Nekichi (Rentaro Mikuni) to a boulder for more than twenty years for loving his own sister Uma, a mentally handicapped nymphomaniac, who, according to ancient custom, is a carrier of bad luck. This unexpected reworking of the myth of Sisyphus, during those twenty years, Nekichi digs a hole with the hope the rock may one day fall in, is one among the

many surprising elements of this considerably complex work.

A film woven from multiple threads, replete with splendid images, it culminates in a riveting ritual pursuit “urged by the Gods” in which the islanders don their ancestral masks, chase Nekichi and eventually kill him for having run off with Uma; a remarkable sequence where Imamura describes with tremendous narrative force and by way of a series of stunning shots, the unfolding of the mechanisms of repression in a “natural” society. This society evokes more those of South East Asia (Indonesia) than Japanese society, and it is, despite appearances, far from ideal. Kariya the engineer is both a witness to, and catalyst of, the drama. The moral of the film is bitterly clear: five years later, the island is invaded by tourists, and Coca-Cola billboards abound along the train tracks where runs a “tiny train” full of tourists. The driver is Kametaro, Nekichi’s real son: he thinks he sees Toriko on the rails, but it’s only a mirage.

Once again, “civilization” gets the last word, even if Imamura resents such a conclusion, a conclusion far from Rousseauist in nature. For the filmmaker, Kuragejima’s inhabitants are the last representatives of what he calls the “homo ludens,” a people closer to those of South East Asia than to the urban Japanese. For a director who has searched deeply, perhaps more than any other filmmaker, for the nature of his countrymen’s roots, all the while criticizing their contemporary expression, the question of the real “origins of the Japanese” remains unanswered. Here, the theme of a fictitious attachment to the motherland finds its corollary in either the escape to the interior of Japan or to another country (*A Man Vanishes*, *Profound Desire of the Gods*). It is quite logical then that Imamura would become interested in the (in)voluntary exiles that were the *The Making of a Prostitute* (*Karayuki-San*) or the unreturned soldiers *In Search of Unreturned Soldiers* (*Mikikanhei o Otte*). In these documentaries, shot originally for television, the filmmaker examines two cases symptomatic of the uprooted Japanese: first, the women taken more or less by force to military brothels in China during the Meiji era, some of whom, though very old, remain in Malaysia and never even

considered returning to the “homeland” and second, the soldiers of the Imperial Army, who oddly enough, stayed behind in the territory in which they found themselves at the time of the 1945 armistice. Many did not learn that the war was actually over until years later. In typical Imamura style, the director is filmed alongside his small crew as he interviews the characters involved in his investigation. However, at least in the case of *The Making of a Prostitute*, the interest in the subject is not entirely conveyed by this method; the film remains at the level of a television documentary, without ever really surpassing the shattered “cinema-verité” of *A Man Vanishes*.

A PERIOD OF TRANSITION: TELEVISION AND TEACHING

It was the fatal financial failure of *Profound Desire of the Gods* that drove Imamura to semi-retirement from cinema. During which time he, like many of his colleagues, divided his time between television production and other activities; most notably in 1975, the creation of a private film school, “The Film and Radio Institute of Yokohama,” and equally as important, Imamura continued his anthropological and ethnographic research during his many trips to South East Asia (to Borneo) and even to Morocco.

However, one can surmise that the film demon was eating away at Imamura. He, like many of his colleagues forced into near silence after 1972, could not help himself from working on a project very dear to him. After many years of negotiations with various production companies, he managed as well as could be expected, to convince Shochiku (a Studio desperately seeking “quality films” at the time) to produce and adapt a Ryuzo Saki novel, based once again on classified criminal police files: *Vengeance is Mine* (*Fukushu Suru Wa Ware Ni Ari*)

The story traces the life of a very perceptive “mad assassin” who commits a series of crimes in different areas of Japan. Taking up the obscure marriage of crime and sex frequently extolled by Oshima, Imamura was seduced by the “hero” of Saki’s novel, a character whose highest ambition is to become

a “criminal genius” and who draws his criminal energy from sexual relations with women. Disguised as different “respectable” characters, a lawyer or a University of Kyoto professor, he constantly slips away from the pursuant police and has sexual relations with the daughter of the head of a brothel where he was hiding for awhile. Even though she discovers his real identity and fears becoming a victim herself, she agrees to follow him. Eventually her fear is realized: he strangles her while they make love.

Another lengthy work, *Vengeance is Mine* is structured around multiple flashbacks and in this way, it is a partial repetition of Imamura’s earlier films, only this time, the “hero” is a man. As well, the film suffers from an “explanatory ending,” doubtlessly superfluous, in which the son spits in the face of his father who has come to visit him in prison, crying out “I should have killed my father first!” (in a flashback revealing the son, axe in hand, wanting to kill his father). This overemphasized Freudian connotation is most likely the weakness of a film that nevertheless remains important and is somewhat of a departure from Imamura’s “anthropological” investigations. But like many others, Imamura suffered not simply from a period of imposed silence, but from the overall degradation of Japanese cinema in a country at an economic zenith, a country hardly concerned with individual creativity, let alone in a creative force that undermines the taboos in place.



INTERVIEW with Shohei Imamura

By Max Tessier

*W*hat were the first ties between your studies at Waseda University and cinema?

At first, around 1950, I wrote and staged several plays at the University. People often asked me what type of theatre I was interested in and I would answer “Shingeki” (modern theatre), but in fact, I was rather critical of it and that’s why I turned toward film. At the time, I was really interested in a type of Japanese theatre that is very popular, a common theatre, a sort of “sub-Kabuki” aimed at the lower classes. It is a theatre of extraordinary vitality: this explains why I made *Stolen Desire* (*Nusumareta Yokubo*), a film about an itinerant troupe performing this kind of theatre. The “intellectual” boy in the leading role, Hiroyuki Nagato, who is quite interested in this theatre, is obviously in some way my double. For me, the vitality of this theatre recalls early Kabuki, back when Kabuki drew its subjects from daily life.

How was your assistantship at Shochiku (1951 to 1954)?

When I entered Shochiku, I knew virtually nothing about film, let alone any directors. I was asked to name a director whom I would like to assist, and knowing only one name at Shochiku, I answered: “Kinoshita” and everyone burst out laughing. Because to be Kinoshita’s personal assistant, one had to be a “pretty boy.” So, somewhat at random, I said “Ozu” and in effect, I

ended up working on three of his films *Early Summer (Bakushu)*, *Flavour of Green Tea Over Rice (Ochazuke no aji)*, and *Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)*. Then, in 1954, I left Shochiku for Nikkatsu where I became Kawashima's assistant. He was a rather popular director at the time. We were a very small team, quite in contrast to the imposing apparatus of Ozu's productions. However, though I may not have been much influenced by Ozu, I gained technical knowledge from him, how to make a film, perhaps more so than from Kawashima.

You also wrote several scripts, in particular for a few Kawashima films?

I was an assistant with my friend Yoshitaro Nomura, who became a director shortly thereafter, and together we wrote what are called "home-dramas" (family melodramas); typical Shochiku fare. In fact, I think I learned more from Nomura than from Kawashima even though I still wrote a number of scripts for the latter, among them *The Sun Legend of the Tokugawa Era (Bakumatsu Taiyoden)* which has gained a certain reputation in Japan.

Do you consider your first films at Nikkatsu "realist" films? One gets the impression that the real "Imamura style" emerges with Pigs and Battleships (Buta to Gunkan) and that this film marks an important step for you?

I always wanted to make a film like *Pigs and Battleships*, but I still think that *Endless Desire (Hateshi Naki Yokubo)* foreshadows the film because it presents a number of similarities with *Pigs and Battleships*, especially where a kind of "formal dynamism" is concerned. Had I more means at my disposal when making *Endless Desire*, this would be much more apparent. However, since it was only my third film, the company would not give me the means necessary.

What is the significance of food, and especially of meat in your early films, and in particular the symbolism of pigs in Pigs and Battleships?

Since the entire story is built around the sale of pork meat, its importance is a given! But of course, pigs are always seen as the filthiest, the most vulgar of animals and this filthiness is linked to the very context of the action: the people living around the American base are themselves pigs. I also insisted on the comical side of pigs. In the final sequence where the pigs are released into the street, I wanted them to be really "symbolic." In fact, in order to get this effect, I wanted to film really fat pigs, but the budget only allowed for slimmer, smaller pigs which I ended up simply filming in close-up! So I finally didn't get as "grotesque" an effect as I had hoped for. In *Endless Desire*, Shoichi Ozawa is a disgusting little man, and the way he chews his meat makes him an even "filthier," dirtier man.

In Pigs and Battleships, the relations between men and women that we see in your later films are present; despite the nasty treatment and behaviour on the part of the girl's (Jitsuko Yoshimura) pimp, she nevertheless keeps returning to him, even at the end of the film ...

But that's my "ideal" view of a woman; she must be strong, willful, full of vitality and attach herself to weak men, like me! But here, because the couple is still fairly young, the girl does not submit sexually to her lover, unlike in *Intentions of Murder (Akai Satsui)*. In any case, I believe that on the surface, Japanese women seem to have changed since the war, but in fact, they have stayed the same; at least the majority has. By the way, this applies to Japanese men as well.

Since Endless Desire you have worked with the Director of Photography Masahisa Himeda, who seems to have developed a particular visual style, a highly contrasted lighting style where lighting serves to create a feeling of claustrophobia. Is this how he usually lights or did you request this as soon as you began working together?

I first collaborated with Kurataro Takamura, Kawashima's Director of Pho-

tography, then with Himeda. I have to admit that indeed, I did follow his suggestions for a number of scenes. For example, at the end of *Endless Desire*, when Takeshi Kato kills Ozawa, I had planned to film the scene in two or three shots, but it was Himeda who suggested filming it all in one shot, with a camera movement. In the end, in the typhoon, you hardly see a thing, you can only hear the characters' voices, but Himeda had the idea of using a lamp that swings back and forth in the wind intermittently lighting the characters. All this was done in close cooperation with the lighting cameraman, Yasuo Iwaki. In general, we always discussed the camera angle, the tone of the scene, etc. But Himeda has never liked free and open spaces: he always tries to put something in between the camera and the characters: ladders, ropes, lamps, anything!

Did you choose the original title for The Insect Woman (Nippon Konchuki), which means "Entomological Chronicles of Japan?" In the film, like in many that followed, one detects a growing interest for all kinds of insects: one thinks of the surrealists, of Bunuel who always put insects in his films...

Originally, I chose the only title *Konchuki* (entomology), but it's the publicity department of Nikkatsu that wanted to add "Nippon", fearing that the public would mistake the film's meaning and take it for an adaptation of a La Fontaine fable! I actually stumbled across the title purely by chance: I was drinking sake while writing the script (of *The Insect Woman*) when I noticed an insect incessantly circling my ashtray. I thought to myself that my character found herself in somewhat of the same situation, and so I chose the title *Konchuki*. Moreover, at the time, I was dating quite a few "Furyo Shojo" women (delinquents, party girls) who thought once they were in their twenties, they should calm down and become "adults." This experience confirmed my idea that despite appearances, the mentality of Japanese women has not really changed...

As for the insects and surrealism, I have to say that my scriptwriter, Keiji Hasebe, was himself quite interested in surrealism and a certain "grotesque-

ness." He suggested using strange effects as a way of further plunging into the depths of human nature: it surfaces quite well in *Intentions of Murder (Akai Satsui)*, but it's a little different in *Insect Woman*. There, I emphasized more the terrifying fact that a woman's energy does not do much to change her situation, but instead it makes her turn in circles, such that she remains what a woman was, and still is, in Japanese society: submissive, dominated and sentimental.

In Pigs and Battleships and Insect Woman, you introduce a number of different prostitutes who in the end seem to be the only "liberated women" in Japanese society...

It's not quite that, but I am very interested in people who have broken off from their families, their "furusato" (country, place of birth), and I have noticed that most of the women who do this are obviously bar hostesses, actresses, prostitutes; just like actors in a travelling theatre troupe. It is these characters who interest me.

Why did you select such a well known actress Sachiko Hidari for Insect Woman when in the next film, Intentions of Murder, Masumi Harukawa was virtually unknown to film audiences?

What interests me in an actress is her vitality, her energy, not her beauty or "prettiness." There's the link between Sachiko Hidari and Masumi Harukawa. Sachiko Hidari showed all that energy in a film like *The Maid's Kid (Jochukko)*: she was running all the time, something rarely seen in a Japanese film. Masumi Harukawa was a very popular actress in the Nichigeki Theatre.

You like "imaginary," oneiric scenes, especially in Intentions of Murder. In this film, there are several very beautiful and dreamlike scenes: the train, the nightmare, the empty silent tram. They tend to evoke Murnau's Sunrise.



Sadako's uncertainty expressed in a dreamlike tramway sequence in Intentions of Murder

I never had many theoretical intentions when I filmed those scenes. What I tried to do was express Sadako's continual hesitation; her feelings as a "mother," her attachment to a family that wasn't her own, and her irrational physical relation to a man who raped her. In this way, the tram scene becomes quite explicit: it expresses mostly how Sadako always returns to the family at the very moment she could escape and finally free herself. She never quite seizes this opportunity, and so her life will stay the same. It's a constant interior struggle. It is not that she is disappointed because she lives in the city instead of in the country, but because she has been separated from her real family and that has nothing to do with the symbolism of the silk-worms.

Introduction to Anthropology: The Pornographers (Jinruigaku Nyumon) presents itself as a vivid critique of sexual frustration in modern Japanese society. How is the film directly related to the novel of The Pornographers (Akiyuki Nozaka) and were there many changes between the two?

One day, on a train, I read a really interesting Nozaka short story. In fact, the director Keiichi Ozawa was supposed to shoot a film adaptation of the story, but the company would only let him direct it if I wrote the script, which I did. But in the end, they also decided I should direct it. So, from the outset it's not a project I really wanted or planned on, but rather an interesting coincidence. We made a few changes, most notably the entire ending (the orgies); I was unable to shoot the ending of the novel faithfully because of the censors as they would have distorted everything. In any case, I think it's normal that a filmmaker brings changes to the work being adapted; it's a way in which one can distance oneself from the original work. For example, in Fujiwara's novel, Intentions of Murder, the action takes place in Shinjuku, but I set the film in Sendai, almost 250 km north of Tokyo.

For A Man Vanishes (Ningen Johatsu), you did extensive documentary research, but the theme of the disappearance of the individual, of the loss of social identity, is the same as in the work of writer Kobo Abe, as in Man

Without a Map (Moetsukita chiz.uor). *Where do you see the differences?*

When I shot *Insect Woman*, I took notes from what a model in the film told me and I thought it would make a good subject, but I never made the film. However, what interested me was not so much to create a “well made” film, but in fact almost to throw my notes directly onto the screen. For a long time I have been interested in the problem of people who disappear into big cities without leaving any trace, what in Japan is called “Johatsu” (Evaporation or Disappearance). Like suicide, it’s a fairly widespread social phenomenon in Japan and I felt the system of direct notes could replace a pre-established script. There especially lies the difference with Kobo Abe, whose interest in this type of phenomenon remains still quite theoretical, abstract, and literary.

What do you reproach, in your words “well made films?”

At the time of *Pigs and Battleships*, I wondered if there weren’t too many limits placed upon this type of films, like those of Ozu, Kawashima, etc. It bothered me deeply; this all-too-perfect balance annoyed me and right after making *My Second Brother (Nianchan)*, I made a decision to break with this kind of cinema. I think *A Man Vanishes* is the most successful example of this rupture. But, I continued on with films like *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess (Nippon Sengoshi)* films that were more and more direct, less and less constructed...

*As you continued to make films, one got the sense that your characters follow a certain itinerary; going from the North to the South of Japan, right down to the extreme South in *Profound Desire of the Gods* (Kamisami no Fukaki Yokubo). Were you seeking, as it has often been said, the origin of a primitive Japanese people?*

Since I was raised in Tokyo, I always believed as a child that peasants only came from Tohoku (the northern region of Honshu) because anyone who

called himself a peasant and who came to work in the city called himself a Northerner. My first films then, show peasants from Tohoku. But when I ventured South, I discovered peasants playing “shamisen,” peasants who took more time to live; in short, I found a culture very different from that of the North. I became very interested in this culture of leisure/pleasure, quite atypical in Japan. This is not to say that this culture of leisure is one in which everyone is having fun all the time, but rather, in this Southern culture, people are closer to what is called the “homo ludens.” And so, I wanted to show these people who are removed from modern Japanese society, who live on the periphery of a society that is very artificial and pretends to be democratic; Japanese democracy is nothing but an illusion. For me, this Southern culture was much more “real” and it was a way in which to criticize modern industrial Japan.

Would you say then that the roots of the Japanese are found in these isolated Southern Islands?

In fact, I believe these insular Southern populations have more in common with other Asian peoples (from the South-East) than with other Japanese. There one finds a civilization of pleasure, generally poorly regarded by the Japanese of the North. The idea of masculine beauty is very much a Southern idea, found in other countries of South-East Asia like Indonesia, and one finds it in these Japanese islands as well.

*After *Profound Desire of the Gods*, why did you stop making films involving extensive “mise-en-scene?”*

My films frightened Nikkatsu, and I was told the public was not interested in them. In fact, I believe that *Profound Desire of the Gods* was what you might call the last “different” card played by the companies. Its commercial failure marked the end of a period begun ten years earlier known more or less as the “New Wave.”

Then you produced A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a bar Hostess independently. Where was the starting point?

Of course, I wanted to tell a political history of Japan that was “different,” one that incorporated the tales of this bar hostess prostitute. In Yokosuka, I found this woman in a bar for “gaijin” (foreigners). It was the kind of place where no one had any family outside of the bar itself. These women are all a little adrift and are tied in some way to the problem of “burakumin”. Scorning Japan and the Japanese, they seek the company of strangers, only to find G.I.s or American sailors. In general, the “burakamin” have broken all family ties to go work in the city, but they are unlike the Jews who generally maintain very close relations with their families. Farmers think the “burakamin” are inferior and reject them so the “burakamin” tend to collect in big city suburbs, where they form their own slums.

Among the films you made for television in the last few years are The Making of a Prostitute (Karayuki-San) and Mohamatsu Returns Home (Muhomatsu: Kokyo ni kaeru). The Making of a Prostitute deals with former prostitutes of the Nippon Empire, prostitutes sent throughout Asia, many of whom stayed behind while Mohamatsu Returns Home addresses the soldiers who return to Japan often many years of isolation. Do you think these people despise Japan?

I don't believe that these women and men hate Japan, because many of them were born during the Meiji era and are still quite patriotic. These prostitutes felt, quite falsely, liberated by the restoration of Meiji and consequently, they faithfully supported the Emperor. They attributed their newly found liberty to the Emperor; you don't get more patriotic than that!

But the old “Karayuki-San” in the film was a little afraid to go home because she had met people from Mitsubishi, etc., and felt that Japan would be another foreign country and not the idealized homeland that she and others, had in mind. When I went to Yokosuka, in Sasebo, in all these differ

ent cities with American bases, I realized approximately 10% of the girls were “burakumin.”

Surely you have seen .the other very sentimental and patriotic film based on the same “Karayuki-San” story, Sandakan Hachiban Shokan Bohkvo by Kei Kumai. What do you think of it, in relation to your film?

It once was suggested that I adapt Yamazuki's novel. I refused, because it was far too sentimental and showed only the teary side of the problem. When I met the real “Karayuki-San” of my film, I had in front of me a woman, still very alert, with good morale, a far cry from the “depressing” side of the novel. The other older women I met all told me they had been tricked, that they had been forced to go to these other countries. I found this rather odd given that someone had to know what was really going on and that it was pretty difficult to ignore the lot of these women at the time. I thought there had to be another reason, most likely that they wanted to escape their family situation, and to leave Japan. In them, I found the energy that comes through in the heroine of Insect Woman; it's an energy I really underlined in the film.

Right now, you have another project, the adaptation of Ryuzo Saki's novel, Vengeance is Mine (Fukushu suru wa ware ni ari): does it bear any relation to your previous films?

Yes. I would very much like to make this film because the heroine reminds me of those in my previous films, and there are a number of scenes that recall, at least to some extent, *History of Postwar Japan As Told By A Bar Hostess*. But given the current situation, it will be very hard to make the film. Actually, it's a film that depends really on Shochiku. The company executives have read the script, but the way in which they have interpreted it doesn't bode well for future relations: we have absolutely opposite views of the film. But for the moment, it's the only solution, because the film requires a proper distribution network that only a company can really offer.



THE LAST RISING SUN

By Dave Kehr

When Shohei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama-Bushi Ko*) won the Palme d'Or at this May's Cannes Film Festival, it provided an abrupt reminder for many people that the Japanese cinema still exists. It does indeed, though just barely. The impact of television has reduced an annual audience set at 1 billion in 1960 to 150 million in 1980; of the 350 films now made each year, the Japanese critic Tadao Sato estimates that 200 are pornographic. Many of the New Wave directors of the Fifties and Sixties have given up in frustration: when not making films whose quality he sniffs at, Kon Ichikawa acts as a spokesman for a Japanese cigarette company; after the failure of his 1972 *Summer Soldiers* (*Sama soruja*), Hiroshi Teshigahara married an heiress and retired. If the elderly Akira Kurosawa is able to continue working, it is because of foreign support, while Nagisa Oshima, the best known internationally of the young filmmakers, supports himself in Japan as the host of a popular television talk show for housewives. Shohei Imamura is almost completely unknown in the U.S. and Europe (though the Cannes prize, one hopes, will change that); it seems a miracle that he is able to find the domestic funding to work at all, much less in the epic mode he favours.

Imamura has been making films since 1958. If he's still unknown in the U.S. (along with most of the rest of the Japanese New Wave), it's probably because his work breaks so violently with the tradition of the Japanese cinema's "golden age." Imamura's films have none of the serenity and spirituality that we have come to expect from Japanese movies. Instead they are

ragged and violent, vulgar and sarcastic, teeming with needling nervous energy that seems the exact contradiction of Kenji Mizoguchi's cosmic regret and Yasujiro Ozu's sublime acceptance.

Imamura began in films as an assistant to Ozu, working on *Early Summer*, *The Flavour of Green Tea Over Rice*, and *Tokyo Story*. But as he told Audie Bock, in her indispensable *Japanese Film Directors*: "I wouldn't just say I wasn't influenced by Ozu; I would say I didn't want to be influenced by him. The fact that his directing of actors, for example, was cast in too rigid a mold was repugnant to me." Where the typical Ozu actor kneels on a tatami mat, gently sipping tea and speaking in the soft, even tones of wisdom and tranquillity, Imamura's actors move in frenzy, barking their lines and flinging every available limb. Where Ozu's world was complete within the squared-off limits of the classic 1.33 image ratio, Imamura often requires a wide-screen format, which still seems ready to burst under the pressure of all the activity it is forced to contain. Where Ozu celebrates permanence, timelessness, continuity, Imamura seeks out the pressure points in Japanese culture and history, moments of rupture like the anarchist riots in *Eijanaika*, sites of institutionalized instability such as the red light district that caters to American sailors in *Pigs and Battleships*.

The only continuity that Imamura discovers is a continuity of chaos, embodied by the buzzing energy, a physical energy that is beyond mind and spirit, which he sees in the Japanese underclass. This constant hum, which explodes now and then into violence or violent sexuality, is the only transcendent force in Imamura's films; yet it is a force not of religion but of superstition, not of courtly love but carnality, not of spirit but of flesh. If Imamura's characters are able to survive the constant upheaval of their existence (the anarchy of civil war, the devastation of world war, the desperation of everyday life), it's because they possess this primitive, physical power, the simple, brutal determination to be.

According to some sources, Imamura was himself a product of the underclass;

a teenager at the end of World War II, he supposedly survived by working on the fringes of black market and prostitution rings. Audie Bock, more reliably, reports that "he was the son of a physician and attended all the elite primary and secondary schools that should have set him on a course toward the University of Tokyo and a comfortable, sedate business or government career." But an older brother introduced him to the theatre, and while a student of Western history at Waseda University, he began to write and perform for student groups. Although his student friends performed "modern" plays, Imamura felt drawn to the popularized Kabuki theatre of the lower classes.

The movies might have seemed a modern way of exploring this popular tradition, but not at the Shochiku Company's Ofuna Studios, where Imamura was hired as an assistant director. Ofuna was the home of Ozu and all of the aristocratic refinement that Ozu (at least, late Ozu) represented; after three dispiriting years, he departed for the newly revitalized Nikkatsu Studios, where he apprenticed himself, as assistant and later scenarist, to Yuzo Kawashima, whose broad "nonsense" comedies were closer to what Imamura had in mind for himself.

When the chance finally came to direct, Imamura was assigned to a story of a travelling Kabuki troupe, the same milieu that had fascinated him in his student days. Imamura later told Max Tessier that the hero of *Stolen Desire* (*Nusumareta yokuja*), a young intellectual whose love for the "people's theatre" soon turns into an erotic fixation on the troupe's leading lady, was a double for himself. As the Company tours the Tobacco Road districts of Osaka (the program consists of fragments of classical drama, punctuated by rowdy strip shows), the young man finds himself forced into an unwanted relationship with his loved one's hard-bitten younger sister.

Apparently pleased with the results, Nikkatsu rushed Imamura into two more projects for 1958. *Nishi Ginza Station* (*Nishi ginza eki-mae*) was a vehicle for the popular singer Frankie Nagai; around the studio's only instruction,



Kita, the hogs and Haruko in *Hogs and Warships*

that Nagai sing the title song three times, Imamura invented a preposterous plot line that had a melancholic Nagai constantly flashing back on a desert island idyll he enjoyed with a native girl during the war. *Endless Desire* (*Hateshi naki yokubo*) matched Imamura for the first time with Shinsaku Himeda, his cinematographer for the next ten years. The story, which has a real Imamura flavour, centres on a group of five people searching for a cache of morphine buried in what was once an American air-raid shelter, and is now the basement of a butcher shop. As the search continues under the leadership of a ferocious widow, the characters fall in and out of a series of affairs; once the treasure is found, the widow poisons them all, but is herself killed when she falls into a river from an unfinished bridge during her escape.

Although these first three films were never released outside of Japan, the plot summaries provided by Bock and Max Tessier in *Cinema d'aujourd'hui* No. 15 suggest that Imamura's themes and manner were coalescing quickly. There is, first, the preference for provincial settings and the thick Osaka dialect; second, the way of seizing the broadest forms of popular entertainment, farce, musical, or melodrama, and pushing them to extremes where the code of surface realism breaks down, plots becoming a tangle of indecipherable intrigues, character psychology turning into ceaseless, unthinking movement. Other stylistic figures emerge, most significantly the image of the closed society as represented by the show-business clan of *Stolen Desire* and the group of conspirators of *Endless Desire*. These groups cannot contain the erotic energy of the individuals they hold together; a kind of moral incest breaks out, which will lead to the literal incest of *The Pornographers* (*Jinruigaku nyumon*) and *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (*Kamiga no fukaki yokuba*). And then there is *Nishi Ginza Station*, with its wilfully ironic image of an island paradise; another closed society, but this time a redemptive, liberating one. The island paradise will appear again in *Profound Desire of the Gods*, being prepared for a mass invasion of Japanese tourists. For the Imamura characters that dream of escape from Japan's closed island culture, there is only the borrowed Western fantasy of another

island: another paradise that will quickly become another Japan.

After one more assignment, *My Second Brother (Nianchan)*, an earnest piece of social realism set among the impoverished coal miners of Kyushu, Imamura produced his first mature film, the 1961 *Pigs and Battleships*. *Endless Desire's* juxtaposition of air-raid shelter and butcher shop here becomes the port city of Yokosuka, where the military might of a U.S. naval installation is aligned with the fleshy pleasures on sale in the local red light district. To compound the metaphor, Imamura involves his hero, a scraggly young hustler named Kinta (Hiroyuki Nagato), in a bizarre plot to raise black market hogs, which are kept penned in the shadow of the battleship and fed by garbage purloined from the American kitchens. While Kinta doles out slop to his tiny pink charges, his girlfriend Haruko (Jitsuko Yoshimura) pleads with him to escape with her. The island paradise she has in mind is the factory city of Kawasaki, where they will be able to get honest work and settle down. But before Kinta can make up his mind, a rival gang arrives and hijacks the hogs.

The film concludes with a grotesque, surreal, and very funny shoot-out on the neon-bedecked main drag, suddenly streaming with squealing pork. It is a spectacular debut for the animal imagery that will run through all of Imamura's work. Though the equation (victimized pigs = exploited people) is more didactic than the effects he will create later, the use of the animals as a kind of rhythmic extension of the characters is extremely sophisticated: The gangsters unleash the animal panic of the pigs, and the screen becomes a swirl of darting, dashing movements, both human and porcine, creating a chaos that ends in universal destruction.

Haruko survives to become the first of Imamura's instinctively independent, infinitely resilient women. A sense of fear surrounded the strong women of Imamura's apprentice films; they seem to have been more rough-edged, energized versions of the conventional *femme fatale*, drawing men to their doom through a consuming sexuality. In *Pigs and Battleships*, fear turns to

awe: Haruko does not destroy Kinta as much as she supplants him, drawing on a hidden inner strength to keep going long after his frantic scheming has failed. Imamura reverses the traditional associations to make Kinta the family man, he takes care of his pigs as if they were his children, and himself plays as a child to the older, tougher men who run the gang, and Haruko the independent spirit; from this point on, men will be the characters tied most firmly to a group identity; most comfortable in and most dependent upon the closed, incestuous society-while women will feel the urge to escape.

In *Pigs and Battleships*, Imamura expresses this cross-sexual tension by alternating densely packed deep-focus shots of Kinta, which bind him closely to the parallel worlds of the hog farm and the red light district, with airy, floating telephoto close-ups of Haruko, which lift her out of the world, isolating her within her own thoughts and feelings. The telephoto close-up is a close-up without intimacy, a scrutiny rather than an affectionate gaze. Imamura looks at most of his heroines this way, in a regard that suggests at once a cold, scientific detachment and an enforced, self-protective distance. He wants to get close enough to study, but not too close to be seduced.

Imamura's next three films, *The Insect Woman* (1963), *Intentions of Murder (Akai satsui)*, and *The Pornographers*, complete a definite period in his work, after which he would end his association with Shinsaku Himeda, whose highly contrasted black-and-white images contribute a great deal to the texture of these films, and move in a radically different direction. *The Insect Woman*, the original title was *Entomological Chronicles of Japan*, anticipates Fassbinder's *Marriage of Maria Braun* in its use of a naive young girl's gradual hardening into a businesswoman as a metaphor for postwar reconstruction. Tomé (Sachiko Hidari) is followed from her childhood as the illegitimate daughter of a peasant woman through her career as Tokyo prostitute and madam; the film ends with Tomé's betrayal by her own illegitimate daughter (Jitsuko Yoshimura, the Haruko of *Pigs and Battleships*), which Tomé welcomes as a sign that her child has learned her lessons well. *The Insect Woman* is a female-centred film about escape and survival; *The*

Pornographers (original title: *Introduction to Anthropology*) is a male-centred film about entrapment and defeat, in which the protagonist, a mild-mannered businessman who produces porno shorts, has an affair with a dying woman who insists that he marry her daughter. In the end, disgusted by flesh-and-blood women, the hero constructs a life-size doll of his dream girl and retires to his houseboat-an island paradise that promptly sinks.

As their pseudo-scientific original titles suggest, both films are rather cold and clinical; Imamura's themes seem here to have frozen into theses, and he is content to follow out their implications without adding much inflection or ambiguity to the schematic framework. But the middle film, *Intentions of Murder*, is a minor masterpiece, in which Imamura's scientific detachment comes up against a subject it cannot conquer, a mystery it cannot explain.

Sadako (Masumi Harukawa) is an unmarried housewife, an orphaned peasant girl who was taken in as a maid by a wealthy family, was seduced by the eldest son, and later bore him a child. The members of this unstable, improvised family live together in a cramped, rundown house in the frigid northern city of Sendai, where the father, now a broken, petty man, works as a functionary in the local library. While he is away on a business trip to Tokyo, Sadako is raped by a burglar (Shigeru Tsuyuguchi), who immediately falls in love with her; the strong, fleshy Sadako makes him long for the mother he never knew. The rapist returns to see Sadako again and again, threatening to expose their relationship if she refuses to run away with him. Sadako discovers that he has a heart ailment, and plans to murder him with a cup of poisoned tea. Meanwhile, her husband's mistress (*other* mistress) has discovered Sadako's secret life, and begins collecting evidence of her infidelity in hopes of finally securing her lover for herself.

Intentions of Murder is a story of a woman who is willing to kill in order to preserve her unhappiness. As shaky as Sadako's family situation is, it is infinitely more secure than anything she will know with her rapist-cum-lover-no-job for a man with a bad heart. Although she comes to pity him, he



Sadako in *Intentions of Murder*

had broken into her home only to steal enough money to pay for his heart medicine, Sadako knows that the passionate love he offers can only destroy what comfort, what marginal position, she has. Because he threatens her with sexual fulfilment, with a vague possibility of romantic happiness, he has to die.

As Sadako, Masumi Harukawa is the least “actressy” actress imaginable: a solid, almost stocky woman, she doesn’t perform in front of the camera so much as simply exist. Surrounded by highly stylized, emphatically expressive performers, the two men and the rival mistress are deliberately overscaled, cartoonish figures, she never seems to address the audience at all. There seems no urge to communicate in her gestures, no desire to be understood in her look. Imamura doesn’t even allow her the grace of movement that is used so often in film to create a sense of specialness, of sympathy, for an inarticulate character. What she does have is a staunch physical presence, a body that insistently communicates its own weight and shape. She is sexual without being in the least sensual; sensuality would require a self-consciousness, a cultivation, she could never possess. If her sexuality is what has led Sadako to her entrapment, attracting the weak, frightened men who hope to find strength and security in her, it is also the secret of her survival and triumph. It is the sexuality of procreation, perpetuation, and the irresistible urge to exist.

Sadako doesn’t change in any obvious way over the course of *Intentions of Murder*. No definable character emerges from the blankness of her body; no ideas are born behind her distant expression. But she does learn, without ever grasping the principle consciously, to trust the physical force she contains, to let her vitality guide her life. After the rape, Sadako tries to commit suicide out of her sense of shame; she fails, and decides to have lunch instead. It’s the last time she will try to fight her body, and the decision to live, though it is made unreflectingly, seems to make her strength grow.

Imamura charts Sadako’s progress by giving her a complicated knitting



Toriko, the rock and engineer Katiya in *Profound Desire of the Gods*

machine to work. At first she can't find her way around the arrangement of wires and yarn, but by the end of the film she has mastered the mechanical, back-and-forth movement that drives the apparatus. She sits up into the night, repeating the same simple gesture, the click-clack of the machine that becomes an amplified, indomitable heartbeat, pounding out the rhythm of her life. She seems to have invoked some primal force, something supernatural, with the incantation of her knitting machine: snow begins to fall and cover the city as if in answer to her call, snow that bleaches, blankets and abstracts Imamura's images as if the world of the film were evolving toward Sadako's own sublime blankness. The snow, like Sadako, is nothingness triumphant; its meaningless weight and stolidity conquer everything. Thanks to the snow, the two characters that stand in Sadako's way are eliminated; in the end, she hasn't had to lift a finger.

With its location shooting, flat lighting, and ostensibly random accumulation of sociological detail, *Intentions of Murder* creates a context of social realism. But the impression of realism is constantly inflected by Imamura's placement of stylized, metaphorical images alongside documentary details. This is a documentary style that pushes toward symbolism, a reality that shares the frame with its own analysis. Sadako's son keeps two pet rats in a cage, and Imamura uses his wide-screen frame to balance Sadako, hunched over her household accounts on the right side of the image, with a rat running furiously in his wheel on the left. The comparison is clear and heavy and intrusive. This is Eisenstein's old cut in *October* from a preening Kerenski to a crowing rooster; it forces a reading on an image, reducing something complex and ambiguous to a pat statement. But where Eisenstein requires two shots, Imamura's scope style requires only one: the juxtaposition is spatial rather than temporal, and it yields a more complex effect. The director is visibly entering his film, rather than hiding in the cracks between shots. He wants to make his presence felt.

This kind of editorializing is usually offensive in a film, but in Imamura's case it seems crucial to his style. He insists on imposing himself between

his character and his audience, on emphasizing his own judgements on what he has created, as if he were afraid that otherwise his creation would completely overwhelm him. Like all of Imamura's mature work, *Intentions of Murder* seems divided between irony and awe, recoil and respect. Imamura will use the rat image to trivialize Sadako, but he will also use the snow to give her a mystical power, a supernatural stature. A clear tension can be felt between the filmmaker and the film he has made, and behind that tension there is an element of fear. Imamura knows that Sadako can destroy him, too, that her instinctual power can defeat his scientific detachment and intellectualized art. At the end of the film, Sadako's husband shows her a roll of pictures, taken by his mistress, that unmistakably show Sadako arm in arm with her lover. She looks at them, printed on contact strips that suggest lengths of movie film, and flatly denies that the woman in the photographs is her. She isn't just speaking to her husband; she is telling Imamura that his images haven't captured her, that she has escaped him, too.

The ending of *Intentions of Murder*, along with the implicit film-as-vain-illusion theme of *The Pornographers*, suggests that Imamura was beginning to feel the same discontentment with the closed forms of classical filmmaking that had seized many Western avant-gardes in the late Sixties. Naturalistic narrative no longer seemed to be the pathway to the truth; reality was more complex and contradictory, and required a more complex and contradictory portrayal. Imamura's first self-conscious response to this crisis was apparently the 1967 *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen johatsu*), a project that began as a serious documentary investigation of the social phenomenon the Japanese call "Johatsu" the large number of people who, each year, simply disappear. Imamura began by selecting a typical case from the Tokyo police files (coincidentally or not, the name of the vanished man is "Mr. Oshima"), and then persuaded the missing man's fiancé, Yoshie, to allow his cameras to follow her as she went about her investigation. But somewhere along the line, Mr. Oshima and the legions of Johatsu were permitted to vanish again, as Yoshie lost interest in her absent boyfriend and began to flirt with the actor (Shigeru Tsuyuguchi, the rapist of *Intentions of Murder*) who had been

hired to conduct the interviews, and as Imamura lost interest in abstract social phenomenon in favour of the real-life romance that was developing in front of him. The film ends with Yoshie in a violent confrontation with her sister, whom she believes guilty of having poisoned Oshima; suddenly, Imamura himself bursts into the room and kicks down the walls, exposing the apartment as a set and the confrontation as a performance. The documentary has evolved into fiction.

A Man Vanishes seems a typically conflicted modernist project of the period: fiction and documentary are intermingled, and in the end revealed to be nothing more than variant forms of the same basic lie. But the experience of *A Man Vanishes*, far from shaking Imamura's faith in the documentary, seems to have redoubled it. With the 1970 *History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (*Nippon sengo shi: madamu omboro no seikatsu*), he launched a series of straight documentaries made for Japanese television. These films are perfectly conventional in form, yet beneath their standard rhetoric, a touch of modernist malaise lingers on; taken together, they form almost a parallel oeuvre to Imamura's feature work of the Sixties, in which the subjects and images he had previously treated as fiction are recycled as documentary truth, with *Bar Hostess* standing as a virtual remake of *The Insect Woman*.

The documentaries represent only half of Imamura's output during the Seventies. If his disenchantment with naturalistic narrative led him to reportage, it also led him to a greater interest in fantasy, legends, and folk tales, and attempt to outflank naturalism on the other side by delving into epic, spectacle, and highly stylized melodrama. *The Profound Desire of the Gods* begins with an old man singing the founding myth of the primitive southern island where the film takes place. It is, of course, an incest myth, "brother and sister become man and wife, together they form an island," and much of the action will center on an incestuous family. Nekichi, the hero (Rentaro Mikuni), is himself the product of a liaison between his grandfather and his mother, and is in love with his sister Uma (Yasuko Matsui), the island's

high priestess. But in spite or because of the islanders' association of incest and divinity, Nekichi must be punished for his love. An immense boulder tossed up by the sea on Nekichi's land has been interpreted as a chastisement by the gods, and to expiate his guilt Nekichi has been sentenced to dig a pit deep enough to bury the huge rock, a task he has been at for 20 years. This tropical paradise is a prison for Nekichi, whose Sisyphean punishment suggest Imamura's beloved animal energy turned in on itself, made futile and destructive, but for the Tokyo engineer (Kazuo Kitamura) who has been sent to develop the island's sugar cane crop, the lure of primitivism is still strong. He goes native with a vengeance, dropping his work in favor of frenetic coupling with Toriko (Hideko Okiyama), Nekichi's daughter by Uma, whom two generations of incest have rendered mentally defective.

Much of this material is played in the broad farce style of *Pigs and Battleships*, with the blunt caricatures of hayseed greed and carnality suggesting a Japanese version of *Li'l Abner*; yet the legends and landscapes that hover in the background lend the film a genuine grandeur. This blend of awe and contempt is, of course, highly Imamuraian; it is an application across an entire culture of the attitudes he held toward his earliest heroines, Sadako, of *Intentions of Murder*, conceived as a society. The island represents something different for each of the major characters. For the Tokyo engineer, it is a dream of escape come true, a playground of primitive impulses and the source of a revitalizing primal energy. For Nekichi, it is a microcosm of Japan, where the primitive impulses are punished and re-channeled into meaningless work in the name of progress; he dreams of escaping to another island, and is killed trying. Only Uma, the priestess, seems genuinely in harmony with the place; her energy is of a different sort from the frenzy that grips the males, more controlled and serene, more permanent and implacable. Where *Profound Desire* was spun from a primitive myth, Imamura's next film *Vengeance Is Mine* (*Fukushu suru wa ware ni ari*), was based on a contemporary, urban one: the myth of the master criminal who violates all the laws of society with impunity, stealing, seducing, swindling, and killing his way across the country until, to put the necessary limit on this dangerous

fantasy, he is caught. Based on a true story, by way of a novel by Ryuzo Saki, the film follows Iwao Enokizu (Ken Ogata) through the course of a 78-day crime spree, beginning with the brutal hammer murder of a utilities repairman, filmed in the most harrowing way imaginable: a neutral, Hawksian medium-long shot, and ending with the strangulation of his mistress, who offers herself as a willing victim as they are making love.

Enokizu repeats the journey of *The Insect Woman* in his progress from the provinces to the city, and he seems meant as a male analogue to Tome's female survival talents, the quiet power of sexuality turning to the jittery desperation of violence. Where Sadako of *Intentions of Murder* is secure in her own blankness, Enokizu adopts a series of identities as masks to cover his personal emptiness. There is nothing in him but the restless urge to run and destroy; when he finds his own island haven, in the form of the backstreet inn where his mistress works, he is compelled to destroy it, too. The film eventually offers a disappointingly simplistic Freudian explanation for his hero's actions: The line "We always kill the wrong people" is beautiful; the motive, Enokizu had a weak father, is not. But it is Imamura's ultimate refusal to either despise or forgive his protagonist that makes *Vengeance Is Mine* a devastating experience. Like Sadako, Enokizu is beyond judgement: He is a force in the world, a fact.

With *The Profound Desire of the Gods* and *Vengeance Is Mine*, Masao Tochizawa replaced Shinsaku Himeda as Imamura's cameraman; Himeda's deep focus, black-and-white compositions giving way to Tochizawa's bright but shallow colour style. The loss of depth in the images seems to have given Imamura a greater interest in montage as a means of maintaining his symbolic juxtapositions; the animal imagery no longer shares the frame with the characters, but appears in cutaways that interrupt the dramatic flow. At the same time, Imamura's narrative style becomes more tortured and fragmented, as the classical unities of time and space of the early films are replaced by the discontinuous episodes of *Profound Desire* and the multi-level flashbacks of *Vengeance Is Mine*. Psychological realism, the concen-

tration on a single character developed in depth, is exchanged for the broad, flat characterization of folk tales and popular entertainments; the conflicting element that Imamura once portrayed in a single character are now spread out over a large ensemble cast, as society replaces the individual as the focus of his work.

The title of Imamura's 1981 *Eijanaika* comes from the rallying cry of an 1867 mass movement. The subtitles render *eijanaika* as "Why not?" however a more satisfying translation might be "What the Hell!" It is a cry of a dangerous, rock-bottom freedom, of the abrupt realization that traditions are dead, laws arbitrary, society an empty convention. Such was the situation the lower classes of Edo, present-day Tokyo, found themselves in the middle of the 19th century, when the provincial Shogun clans were battling the emperor for control of the country. Inflation was spinning out of sight, a running gag in *Eijanaika* is the price of rice: if a character goes away for a day or two, it's tripled by the time he gets back; and the entire culture was reeling under the opening of the country to the West after 200 years of enforced isolation. For the poor, there is nothing left, a condition that makes everything possible. Why not wear wild costumes, dance in the streets, loot stores, and tear down buildings? What the hell!

Though *Eijanaika* is based on historical incident, Imamura doesn't have much interest in historical detail. Apparently, he even flaunts his indifference: the film is said to be full of unsettling anachronisms that Japanese audiences perceive immediately. The causes of the conflict between the Shogun clans and the emperor are never given, though we assume the motive is profit, and there's no real attempt made to keep the two sides politically or morally distinct. Instead of history, Imamura is interested in the *eijanaika* state of mind.

The subject is approached from two directions, in two different narrative styles. From above, Imamura looks at the political machinations, the bribes, broken alliances, and murders that lead to the breakdown of order, in

the style of an action-adventure film; the paranoid drive of these passages, with their insanely complicated plotting, calls to mind specifically the highly stylized samurai films of Hideo Gosha. And from below, Imamura looks at individual experiences, the gradual erosion of certainty in ordinary lives, in style of richly ironic character comedy. The two styles blend into something quite original, as if Buster Keaton were starring in one of Fritz Lang's Mabuse films.

The opening images plunge us into the nightmare world of a carnival sideshow. Mountainous women wrestle in the nude; a "mountain girl" bites off the head of a snake and, after chewing the fat, spits a stream of fire over an open flame; a pretty girl in a kimono suddenly extends her neck to a height of six or seven feet, the camera rushing upward with her smiling face to catch her tiny giggle of satisfaction when she reaches her full extension. This carnival of the subconscious becomes Imamura's ruling metaphor and main staging area. It's actually an entire district, spread out along a riverbank near the Ryogoku bridge. The area is home to Edo's pickpockets, beggars, prostitutes, and slave dealers, a Times Square with everything but the neon, and the head man is Kinzo (Shigeru Tsuyuguchi), who runs crime and the carnival as two branches of the same business. Kinzo, a practical man, is on the payroll of both the shogunate and the emperor's forces; when he is simultaneously ordered by one side to start a riot at a silk warehouse and by the other to protect it from the mob without a glimmer of contradiction, and they successfully, carry out both assignments.

Kinzo's carnival isn't the whimsical playground of illusions of the Federico Fellini films; it's a malignant illusion, an institutionalized fraud, recognized as such by both the people who run it and the people who pay for admission. Yet the need to believe in something is so strong that the carnival has a positive social function. These dreams may be shoddy and commercial, but they are dreams after all, and everyone, the show people included, needs something to hold on to. When paper charms begin to rain down mysteriously over the carnival grounds, a sign from the sun goddess that she ap-

proves of the *eijanaika* movement, the carnival people start making and selling counterfeit charms, telling themselves that they're helping out the gods. The fraud, which was probably started by some showman in the next district anyway, has a divine origin and a divine blessing; the gods are all for making a buck themselves.

Kinzo's mistress is a country girl named Ine (Kaori Momoi), sold to the carnival by her impoverished parents after her husband Genji disappeared in a shipwreck. She's now the star of an attraction titled Tickle the Goddess, in which members of the audience take turns trying to blow a paper streamer between her flashing legs; she thinks of herself, unshakable, as an artist. Then Genji (Shigeru Izumiya), suddenly pops up: he'd been rescued by a passing American ship, and has spent six years in the U.S. Now Ine isn't sure what to do, whether to return to America with Genji and start the farm they'd always dreamed of, or to stay on in Edo, where things are getting interesting. Ine becomes the pivot point between Kinzo's ruthless pragmatism and Genji's moony idealism, and pivot she does, betraying both of them in turn and in increasingly quick alternation. If there's a crisis in the culture, she's Irving it, unable to choose among the options suddenly, dizzyingly opened to her. And, like the *eijanaika* rioters, she's enjoying the crisis, dancing through it with a smile of calculating naiveté.

Ine is also the link between the film's two styles, acting as a willing pawn in Kinzo's political plot and playing a comic heroine in Genji's misadventures. Genji burns with his new knowledge of America, and wants to share his dream of freedom and escape with Ine; it won't be complete without her. But every time the dream is within reach, Ine lets him down, turning back within sight of the ship that will take them to the U.S., or getting herself kidnapped, without objecting too much, from the farm Genji has managed to secure in the countryside. Is Genji's freedom, abstract, idealized, and pretty hard work, really preferable to the freedom Kinzo offers in his way, the freedom of money and power? Genji sticks with his play with a determination that is truly Keatonesque, brushing himself off and grimly starting



Eijaneika, "What the hell?"

over each time something explodes. But Genji's adversaries aren't Keaton's inanimate objects and natural forces, they're people, and much less predictable.

The unpredictability that dogs Genji is the principle of Imamura's narrative line. Episodes fire off one another with a lightning crackle, as Imamura puts several plot strands in motion at once and furiously cuts among them. Kinzo plots schemes involving Genji; the political factions plot schemes involving Kinzo; and soon it's impossible to tell who's controlling whom. Causes and effects are systematically, exuberantly muddled; the baffling plot soon seems to be rolling along on its own, impelled by some internal energy none of the characters can grasp. Meanwhile, Imamura is multiplying the focal points in his images: Bright colours compete with sudden movements for our attention, striking individual faces leap out of dense group compositions. Imamura seems to be shooting lines of energy across the screen; sometimes he will exploit the hard, sharp lines of Japanese architecture to give the frame an internal, geometric tension; at other times, he'll create a rhythmic tension between foreground and background actions, a contrast that seems to yank the image apart.

Over the course of its two-and-a-half hours, *Eijanaika* has been gathering energy, storing it up. When the riots finally arrive, the stored energy bursts forth: it's an irresistibly giddy, rushing moment. As the dancing, shouting hordes stream out of the riverside carnival, threatening to cross the Ryogoku bridge into the upper-class territory that is forbidden to them, Imamura allows us to feel the crowd's excitement and sense of mad freedom. Yet, by photographing the river crossing through space-compacting telephoto lenses, he also traps it, pinning the riot down in a two-dimensional space where the energy of the crowd loses its thrust and purpose. Though Kinzo has encouraged the riots for practical political reasons, they are more than political now. The energy that was fed, exploited, and barely contained by the carnival has escaped, levelling everything before it. It is energy without cause and without control, fed equally by greed and ideals, dreams and frauds,

Marx and Freud. It is the energy of Kinta and Haruko of *Pigs and Battleships*, of Tomé of *The Insect Woman*, Sadako of *Intentions of Murder*, Enokizu of *Vengeance Is Mine*, and the islanders of *Profound Desire* brought together and unleashed in its full anarchic fury. It is horrible and hopeful, devastating and invigorating.

The explosion of *Eijanaika* can't be repeated; it is the culmination of 20 years' consideration of one idea, and Imamura can go no further. It is time now to step back and examine the idea from another, more reflective point of view; and that is what Imamura, now 57, has done with the *The Ballad of Narayama*. The sense of a filmmaker in fierce confrontation with his material, constantly defining and redefining his attitudes toward the events he portrays, has begun to fade away; in its place is a sense of acceptance that brings to mind Imamura's old master and counter-example, Yasujiro Ozu. The film itself is a remake, by way of a novel by Shichiro Fukazawa, of a movie from the Japanese cinema's "golden age," a 1958 production with the same title by Keisuke Kinoshita. The circle has started to close.

With its primitive provincial setting, a village in the northern mountains, and concentration on rustic sexual humour, the first half of the *Ballad of Narayama* occupies familiar Imamura territory, yet this mountain village differs from the tropical paradise of *Profound Desire* in its extreme poverty. Because there is so little to eat, an ancient tradition requires everyone over the age of 70 to be taken to the mountaintop and exposed to the elements; even so, there is not enough for the children, and newborn babies are sometimes found drowned in the stream. In this world, sexuality is not a life force but a curse, and with every coupling a potential murder, the sexual humour takes on a black, dangerous tone. The forces that Imamura has celebrated in other contexts must be kept tightly repressed here; they mean not survival but almost certain death. It is a world harsh even by Imamura's standards: The animal imagery is much more violent than usual, the human violence, which includes an entire family buried alive for the theft of a few potatoes, much more stifling and cruel.

Orin (Sumiko Sakamoto) is approaching 70, but she is determined not to go to the mountaintop until she has found a new wife for her widowed son Tatsuhei (Ken Ogata). The first half of the film is devoted to her efforts to find a suitable candidate, inter-cut with, and parodied by, the efforts of a younger, idiot son to lose his virginity. Once the new wife has been found, Orin is willing to go; indeed she must, to make room for the new mouth at the table. Tatsuhei agrees to carry her there, and as they approach the traditional exposure site, a canyon filled with skeletons, representing sacrifices from time immemorial, a few white flakes begin to fall from the sky; by the time Tatsuhei returns to the village, the entire landscape is covered with snow.

It is the snow, of course, that we first saw in *Intentions of Murder*; the snow that Sadako called down as the extension of her survival. Orin's snow is a snow of survival, too, but in a different sense; its blankness is not of sexuality but of death, the survival it offers not of the individual but of the individual through the family the species. *The Ballad of Narayama* concludes with a profound sense of loss; but, as always in Imamura, the emotion is balanced by its opposite. This is a loss that offers a hope, a disappearance that makes possible permanence. Ozu couldn't have said it better.



IMAGES OF RATIONALITY IN MODERN JAPAN

The films of Shohei Imamura

By Allan Cassebier

With his 1982 film *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama-bushi-ko*)

having been accorded the highest award at this year's Cannes Film Festival, Shohei Imamura should begin to receive the critical attention he has long deserved. Imamura is important in Japanese cinema for the way in which he puts his Japanese audience in touch with matters deeply felt but not always fully realized. The Imamura film ferrets out what is unique in Japanese culture, while at the same time making salient its erosion by the influence of Westernization and modernization.

For Imamura there are a number of closely linked dichotomous concerns that represent conflicts present in and important to the condition of the Japanese. They are the irrational vs. the rational; the primitive vs. the civilized; the spontaneous vs. the conventional; the lower classes vs. the upper classes; and the authentic vs. the contrived. In each case, Imamura believes the first of these conflicting elements to be the locus of value. Further, the first dichotomy holds a central place in his canon.

Despite the outward appearance of a rationally ordered, technologically efficient society, Japanese culture and consciousness are marked by a valuing of the irrational. Imamura seeks, through his films, to recover what is essential to being originally Japanese. It is his belief that there is a certain unique "Japaneseness" rooted in irrationality, through which the Japanese should live.

The term “irrational” is no doubt a stumbling block for the Western reader who regards it as almost entirely a pejorative term. To Western ears “irrational” connotes “crazy,” or “out of control,” or “incapable of functioning.” In Japan, however, “irrational” is to be understood in a different, far more positive way. Non-rational human capabilities are part of what is referred to, intuition, instinct, emotional response, and other such capacities possessed by humans independent of the ability to use language. Moreover, for the Japanese, life itself is irrational in that it is ultimately mysterious and incapable of explanation by any mode of rational activity. Accordingly, one finds in Japanese culture a deeply embedded notion called *yugen*, which entails the presence of mystery and incomprehensibility in all things. Importantly, *yugen* is not only a metaphysical notion but also the source for aesthetic value in the Japanese conception of the arts. To place the appreciator of one’s art in contact with an ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible texture, as Imamura does, is at once to make palpable the irrational in human nature and to achieve the quintessence of aesthetic value.

While Imamura’s exploration of the irrational has specific meaning for his Japanese audiences, it nevertheless has significance for Westerners as well. Raised as we are to value the rational above all other qualities, we have come to equate, all too willingly and somewhat naively, rationality with reality. Imamura challenges this comfortable notion. In so doing, he is really addressing one single audience, Japanese and Western alike. Consequently, when I refer to Imamura’s audience, I am speaking of this collective audience, unless I say otherwise.

In what follows, I will trace some of the most striking images of irrationality that Imamura provides, discussing their relationship to the overall meaning of the films in which they occur.

Ningen Johatsu

A blurring of the distinction between fiction and reality forms the basis for a most memorable image of irrationality in *A Man Vanishes (Ningen Johatsu)*. This film involves a real-life search for a missing man, Tadashi Oshima, who had disappeared a year and a half earlier according to police records, leaving no trace. Shigeru Tsuyuguchi, a professional actor, and Yoshie, the missing man’s fiancée, begin a search for Oshima, followed every step of the way by Imamura’s camera. (Imamura often uses hidden cameras and wireless microphones to assist in his effort to capture the reality of this event.)

Complications immediately set in: an instrument of discovery sanctioned, not by rationality, but by superstition, a medium, a shaman, tells Yoshie that her sister Sayo knows what became of her missing fiancé, Oshima. Yoshie, however, begins to lose interest in the search and becomes romantically involved with the actor, Tsuyuguchi, who plays the role of investigator-interviewer. Coincident with these developments, evidence begins to accumulate, suggesting that Sayo may have been responsible for the death of the missing Oshima.

In this context where real life obtrudes on the fictional texture, making it difficult to retain one’s sense of the fictional as opposed to the documentary, Imamura brings about a most dynamic confrontation between the two sisters in a carefully constructed teahouse. The sisters know they are being filmed, but they do not realize the larger fictional and real life dimensions implied. Evidence is presented belying Sayo’s denials of involvement with Oshima, thereby implicating her in a web of suspicion about her role in his disappearance. Yoshie turns to Imamura in distress, asking, “What is truth?” He replies, “I don’t know,” then claps his hands as he shouts “Set,” signaling that the teahouse set around the sisters is to disappear. The walls of the

teahouse fall, revealing that Yoshie and Sayo are stranded in the middle of a gigantic sound stage.

Imamura remarks on the situation as follows: *You think this set is a kind of truth because it looks like a nice, comfortable room; but it's not, it's a fiction built in a film studio. You think you are fighting with your sister because you are looking for the truth, but in fact you would never be confronting each other like this if the film weren't being made.*

The dismantling of the teahouse set most dramatically highlights Imamura's perception of what is happening.

Already the audience has sensed Tsuyuguchi's unease in his role in the documentary-fiction, or whatever it is we are experiencing. Odd enough, for an actor to be playing a real-life investigator in a search for a missing man, but to have the real-life fiancée of the missing man fall in love with him and have her sister so clearly suspected of the missing man's disappearance is most distressing. Meanwhile, the fiancée constitutes a challenge to our sense of how to relate to the film. Not only does she cross over the line between fiction and reality in relation to the actor, but she also begins to identify with being an actress rather than a real-life fiancée seeking her missing boyfriend. Moreover, she has become a bewildered woman, suspecting her own sister of murder.

The image of the teahouse set disintegrating before our eyes into a sound stage seemingly on cue as Yoshie asks Imamura, "What is truth?" leaves the audience with a blurred sense of the line between reality and fiction in the film, precisely the kind of teasing circumstance Imamura thrives upon. A rational ordering of the experience of a film would involve no such complication or ambiguity. Some films are fictional in nature. They give dramatization to events, objects, and human characters. Other films are documentaries which present some reality on the basis of available evidence. In *A Man Vanishes* Imamura will give us neither fiction nor documentary per se, but rather a curious mixture of both. Also, the word of a shaman does not count

in a rational explanation of the disappearance of an individual, but in the world of *A Man Vanishes*, this is what we are given side by side with compelling rational evidence pointing in the same direction. Ordinarily, actors play roles in fiction while real-life individuals are the subjects in front of the camera in documentaries. In *A Man Vanishes* an actor can become a real-life subject, and a real-life subject can become an actress. Moreover, in this "documentary," the direction the narrative takes is discovered, not known from the outset. At the end, Yoshie assumes the role of directing the final scene, re-enacting a confrontation with her sister with the damning evidence. All of this unsettles our attempts at a rational ordering of what we experience.

Thus, here we are, out in the street, out in the real world as it were, with the extraordinary complication that the real-life fiancée-cum-actress now has become the director of the film. In the street, the "search" continues. Imamura announces, "We now accept that this film is a fiction, a drama, and we will start from there." Yoshie gathers the witnesses to her sister's purported affair with her missing fiancé, and declares, "We are here to learn the truth." As she directs, with Sayo's cooperation, the re-enactment of a scene in which a delivery boy says he spotted Sayo and Oshima entering a building, a matter Sayo will not admit to, cameras, microphones, and clapboards are all clearly visible. After much presenting of evidence indicating that Sayo has lied about an affair with Oshima and after further denials by her, everyone waves good-bye and leaves. Yoshie offers the following summary impression: "I can't believe anything. That's the toughest thing, not being able to believe anything. I wish she were not my sister." The frame then freezes as Yoshie says, "I guess this is the end." The actor-investigator-interviewer-object-of-Yoshie's-affection then says: "Yes, we're out of time. The film is over, but not your life. What will you do tomorrow?" Yoshie replies, "I don't know." At this point, the film ends. The audience, having been so effectively touched by an irrational texture, leaves the theatre. The final scene cannot be rationally sorted out.

Akai Satsui

The paradigmatic Imamura character is a lower class woman who, while not very capable rationally, nevertheless has an intuitive ability to understand. Since she lives close to her existence, responsive to primitive feelings within her, she is willing to cast off conventional morality where circumstance dictates an instinctive, spontaneous response. Imamura portrays this character in a filmic style that he finds authentic, a style that fits with the crude rhythms of the lower class, and irrational, vital life he wishes to dramatize. Imamura has explained: "I want to make messy, really human, Japanese, unsettling films." In this portrayal of the prototypic Imamura character, one can recognize how Imamura's various dichotomies come together in this unique vision.

The character Sadako in *Intentions of Murder (Akai Satsui)* exemplifies the human capacity of intuition. Though she is not able to function well at all in activities we associate with rational competence, such as planning and efficiency, nevertheless, as Audie Bock, puts it, "Her slow, stolid intuition emerges victorious at the end." We see, for example, that she is not a very competent housewife; when her husband leaves on a business trip, she sends him off with an undershirt rather than the dress shirt he needs. Much of the time her demeanour is dumb and sluggish. She is, in Joan Mellen's words, "seemingly uncomprehending of everything around her."

While her husband is away, she is raped by an intruder, who later becomes her lover. Her first reaction is to try to deal with the situation rationally and conventionally. Knowing full well what the traditional code of morality in her culture dictates, she says in voice-over, "I must die." In a slow-motion sequence, which has the effect of distancing us (allowing us to contemplate the general meaning of her situation), Sadako is shown about to run in front of a train, but she cannot go through with it. Instinctively she is able to rise above the conventional morality of her society that demands strict adherence to a code. With black humour, characteristic of Imamura, she finally

gorges on rice after having struggled with her moral dilemma.

Other irrational forces are at work in Sadako as well. Before the rape, she is more like a servant to her husband than a wife-lover. She merely endures her husband's sexual advances. In fact, the classic conflict in Japanese psychology between *giri* and *ninjo* is never more apparent than in Sadako. She finds herself in a situation where her basic human rights have been denied her by a system that puts a traditional moral code above human feeling. Though she is married, her domineering husband has not yet chosen to register her as his wife, and he need not do so until it suits him. Moreover, her son has been registered as the legal child of her husband's parents. The strong conventional notion that children belong to the family seems too powerful to overcome.

The rape thus activates primitive, instinctual feelings within Sadako. After the attack, the rapist kisses her warmly, which arouses her. From that time on, her life begins to change, moving toward an assertion of her basic human nature and the rights that belong to a life lived authentically in response to that nature. Connection is established, through an inter-cut, with her youth when she was free, relatively unrepressed and unbound by conventional morality. We see Sadako sensuously aroused as she allows silkworms to crawl along her legs, the point being that in her youth in rural settings, she was able to respond to a primitive, authentically human condition. Now as an adult, the dictates of rational conformity to society, dominated by a network of conventional moral strictures, stifle her humanity. Only through the intense trauma of the rape is Sadako able to be true to her own self.

As Sadako awakens from the attack, Imamura moves the camera very slowly to encompass in a 360 degree pan the reality to which she returns. We share her sense of disorientation as the reality before us revolves visually. The powerful images composing the rape scene stay with us as Sadako's transformation continues. Later on she defies the legal system that denies her



Toriko's ghost dancing in front of the train in *Profound Desire of the Gods*

One of the most compelling images of the irrational in all of Imamura or Japanese cinema for that matter

rights as wife and mother, defying at the same time what seems an exemplar of rational evidence of her infidelity-photographs taken of her with her rapist/lover. If she were to accept rationality as the highest authority, she would have to admit guilt and accept her suppression by the conventional system. Instead she brazenly takes a stand against her accusing husband, saying in effect, “So what? So I am shown here. Of what significance is it?” She simultaneously accepts and denies the rational evidence. Cognitively, this all seems very irrational to the audience; however, on the level of effect it seems fitting. We have come to be emotionally identified with Sadako. What she is doing feels “right,” though rationally dislocating.

Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo

Imamura conceives of his filmic task as an extended kind of anthropology, a seeking after the origins of “Japaneseness”. For this reason, the title of one of his films involves a reference to anthropology: *The Pornographers: Introduction to Anthropology (Jinruigaku Nyumon)*. In preparing for his films, Imamura does extensive anthropological research, for he does not believe that it is enough for him to have “an aesthetic perception” of some aspect of life and then simply to dramatize it. Rather, he wants to engage in filmmaking itself as an instance of anthropological research. As a result, many of his films have a sense of discovery about them.

One of the most compelling images of the irrational in all of Imamura or Japanese cinema for that matter, is to be found at the end of *The Profound Desire of the Gods (Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo)*. Here the wild and free heroine, Toriko, is being chased by a locomotive as she, now actually a ghost, dances along the railroad tracks. This highly complex image involves Imamura’s central preoccupations and is quite evocative for the audience which has experienced the emotions aroused by the film.

The island Kurage, where the film takes place, is located in the Ryukyu



The Ballad of Narayama (*Narayama bushi-ko*)



Archipelago, the southernmost part of Japan. On this island, attitudes and beliefs exist in as primitive a state as is likely to be found anywhere in Japan. This condition is most attractive to Imamura whose favoured milieu is that of combined filmmaker and cultural anthropologist.

Ryukyu society accommodates a number of superstitious beliefs that structure the islanders' response to events. *Noro* (shamannesses) have powers of direct communication with the Gods. As such, the *noro* serve as spiritual leaders of the society. Toriko is such a *noro*; nevertheless, she is uninhibited in the extreme, her every movement sensuous, indiscriminately sleeping with any man (including her brother), and inarticulate and so wild and unrestrained as to give the impression of being retarded or crazy, or both. To the Western observer and to the urban dweller of Japan, this seeming paradox indicates the extent to which superstition rather than rational ordering governs the world of the island.

Into this situation comes a Tokyo engineer invited to develop a plan for irrigating sugar cane fields. He finds a source of water for the much-needed irrigation, but since the spring he discovers is considered sacred according to island mythology, he cannot use it. In addition, the myth-believing islanders, taking him for a God from across the sea, give him the wild Toriko. At first he resists her primitive advances, which he cannot relate to. But finally he submits; in fact, he gradually becomes enchanted with the spontaneity of the islanders' life and loses some of his civilized inhibitions. He is, however, called back to civilization.

When the engineer returns to discover Coca-Cola and other vestments of civilized encroachment all about, he also learns that Toriko and all of her family are dead except for Kametaro, her brother and his former guide.

Once again a guide, Kametaro drives a new steam engine when suddenly he sees Toriko dancing on the railroad tracks just ahead. He slams on the brakes to avoid hitting this apparition visible only to him (because of his connection with the primitive). In running from the locomotive, the symbol of

civilization and progress, Toriko expresses the attempt of the primitive elements within the Japanese soul to resist destruction by the effects of Westernization, modernization, and, in the broadest sense, the movement to civilize everybody and everything. She also *dances* on the railroad tracks as she keeps ahead of the onrushing machine, giving visual form to her spirited nature. Moreover, according to island mythology, spirits of the dead remain close by during the first years after their physical demise. Thus, for those who live by this belief, Toriko's appearance on the tracks as a ghost is a natural occurrence.

Toriko's incestuous relation with her brother works on multiple levels. Kurage islanders subscribe to the mythical belief in the creation of the island via the incestuous relation of brother God and sister Goddess. Toriko's incestuous relation with her brother is thus indicative of the primitive rejection of the conventional morality that stifles spontaneous, authentic response to life.

CONCLUSION

Other images of irrationality might be mentioned: the utter loss of rational control by all concerned after the pigs stampede at the end of *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta to Gunkan*); Madame Omboro's stubborn, groundless denials of motion picture scenes showing events she has lived through in *History of Post-War Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (*Nippon Sengo Shi: Madame Omboro no Seikatsu*); and the horrifying senseless murders committed by the protagonist in *Vengeance is Mine* (*Fukushu Suru Wa Ware Ni Ari*). At the end of *The Ballad of Narayama* we find still another riveting image of irrationality. In some thirty-five minutes of silent cinema, we follow a son carrying his old father up Mt. Narayama, inspired by the mythical belief that anyone who has reached the age of seventy, in order to die properly, has to make the ascent to the top of the spiritual mountain.

Just where Imamura will go after *The Ballad of Narayama* with his textures

of irrationality is difficult to say. Indeed, it would seem as if he has completed his search for identity of true “Japaneseness”, for he has found his locus in a closeness to nature and a life response to the irrational in human nature. Yet, Imamura most likely will surprise us by discovering new forms which to continue the search. After the truly astonishing approach he used in *A Man Vanishes* we understandably wondered whether or not he had exhausted his style and subject. Since then Imamura has continued with so much creative exploration, both formal and contextual, that we can safely assume that he has yet to give us his final word on and image of the irrational.



SHOHEI IMAMURA Human, All Too Human

By Gilles Laprevotte

“Insects, animals and humans are similar in the sense that they are born, they excrete, reproduce and die. Nevertheless, I myself am a man. I ask myself what differentiates humans from other animals. What is a human being? I look for the answer by continuing to make films. I don’t think I have found the answer.” - Imamura Shohei

A colourful, wild and crazy dance fills the narrow streets of a neighbourhood in Edo, the old part of Tokyo. We are in 1866, at a time when Japan is still cautiously opening its doors to the West. This carnival-esque crowd is filled with “the common people,” wearing garish makeup and grotesque masks, dancing to the cries of “Eijanaika” which is translated as “So what?” At the centre of a series of frenzied plots involving various clans aiming to restore the Emperor’s power to their own profit, is a manipulated crowd expressing a desperate energy hidden behind a shimmering spectacle of masks. Rifles meet with the crowd’s unbeatable “we don’t give a damn!” and women, in full view of the soldiers, expose their buttocks and urinate. The flowing crowd seems somehow liberated, beyond all concern for the present, and for that matter, beyond any future concern. Imamura is not interested in all this as a “Great Revolutionary Showdown” or a settling of scores, but rather he brings to light the imploding power of immediacy.

This scene in *Eijanaika*, of a crowd teeming with life and vital energy, could be a summary of Shohei Imamura’s cinema. As noted by Charles Tesson, the director believes above all in the forces “from below;” those forces coming from the people but also from the body, from sex, for he believes in the energy of desire, in excess, in consumption, in the trivial, in the absence of a real response. Thus the people of *Eijanaika* chant: “We don’t know who will win. So what? They all want to change the world. So what? Men and

women, seek pleasure. Get excited!”

Ine is a female character central to the film. She is sold into prostitution; she exposes her genitals to clients, loves her husband, but refuses to follow him to America. A sex object but also a woman of desire, Ine is the embodiment of a deeply primeval and contradictory energy that Imamura seeks in every character, script and mise en scene. Her final refusal to stop after the death of her husband, a refusal addressed directly to the earth itself, is the strongest expression of that energy. Ine is in the image of the women who populate the director's films; carriers of a vital survival instinct, inhabited and wounded by an incessant confrontation experienced at the very deepest of themselves, a confrontation between status, social image, and what overflows those all too narrow banks: a destabilizing power of desire that could be, according to Imamura's terminology, stolen (*Stolen Desire*), endless (*Endless Desire*) or murderous (*Intentions of Murder*).

Whereas Nagisa Oshima perceives in desire essentially a quasi-asocial force, an almost revolutionary force that can marginalize someone or turn him into a criminal, one thinks of films like *The Pleasures of the Flesh* (*Etsuraku*), *Violence at Noon* (*Hakuchu no torima*) or the diptych *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no corrida*) and *The Empire of Passion* (*Ai no borei*), Imamura shows desire's most intimate, most “primitive” convolutions. He does not hesitate, and with considerable humour, to tend toward the grotesque and the trivial. Whether it's in *The Ballad of Narayama*, *Profound Desire of the Gods*, *Eijanaika*, or even *Zegen*, to cite only those films, Imamura presents sex in its “animality,” its vital primitive force, in both its venal and ideological value (prostitution) as it is staged so radically and outrageously in *Zegen*.

This animal quality, which runs through his films and whose most fundamental expression seems to need to manifest itself through sexuality, Imamura observes as an entomologist would, without any sort of moral judgement or valorization. In *The Ballad of Narayama*, the sexual acts of certain charac-

ters are paralleled with the sexual activity of various animals in the environment, like an “energetic” chain opposed to, or completing, death as symbolized by Mount Narayama.

Imamura's films are thus filled with animals; the caterpillar climbing up the heroine's leg in *Intentions of Murder*; the swine invading the narrow streets at the end of *Pigs and Battleships*, the snake in *Profound Desire of the Gods*. The film is also filled with metaphors or analogies, attributing an animal side to man which gets in the way of the status of human being; such is the case with the protagonists of *Endless Desire*, who, like insects, dig through the earth in search of wealth, or with one of the characters of *Profound Desire of the Gods* who is condemned like Sisyphus to empty an enormous, endless pit. This animality is derived just as much from the trace of primitive impulses remaining in humans, as it is the result of a person's particular social condition; take for example the American gangsters in *Pigs and Battleships*, or the prostitute in *The Insect Woman*, or the murderer in *Vengeance is Mine* whose rage places him beyond the pale of humans and society. Because as with Oshima, the individual murderous act can be the indelible and blinding trace of a repressed or unavowed desire. What draws, in the most inexplicable manner, the heroine of *Intentions of Murder* to her rapist, or the brother to his sister in *Profound Desire*, is in fact a destabilizing force which can, if only for a moment, push the individual to the brink or exclude him definitively from society. With the murderer of *Vengeance is Mine*, Imamura paints a portrait of an individual whose all-pervasive hate excludes him from the world of humans. Wholly irredeemable, the character lives out his refusal, a refusal as noted by Serge Daney that is absolute, an absolute that can only end in death without redemption. Imamura films this man's path without moral judgement, observing and describing the facts and the characters' gestures. Imamura allows the various reasons, psychological, social and other, to come to the surface; reasons that could explain such a behaviour not otherwise easily understood. Here, we witness a sort of evaporation of social man, normalized in a highly policed Japanese society. The filmmaker's entomological approach achieves here a rare intensity,

eliciting an uneasiness in the spectator's ability to identify.

Imamura's cinema could then be situated in an *in between*, a troubling and disturbing balance between what remains of instinctual drives and of the culture of the ancestral Japanese individual, and what makes or doesn't make a social being according to the actual existing norms. Whereas in Oshima's films, the director investigates that which moves, changes, or revolutionizes the world and humanity (thus his interest in Japan's official history and in avant-garde ideas and political movements), Imamura's scripts focus on the question of Japanese identity. He unearths, at its very core, what it has that is immutable, or at least, he exposes its primitive roots buried beneath the veneer of a society of consumption. It is with the sumptuous *Profound Desire of the Gods* that Imamura directly tackles this question.

The film is set on an island in the archipelago of Ryukyu (southernmost part of Japan) where an ancestral microcosmic society which mixes superstition and mythology is confronted by the arrival of the modern world in the form of a future airport and inevitable tourism. In the fascinating festering story, both semi-documentary and highly narrative in its point of view, Imamura seems to delve into the very origins of Japan's contradiction which it tries to bury beneath the many levels of an adopted modernism. This is, in no way, a form of conservatism or an attachment to the past, but rather an acknowledgment of modern Japanese society's tendency (and modern society's tendency in general) to standardize, to level and to evacuate all that does not fit into "the sense of history," all that falls outside the caudine forks of industrialized society.

Film after film, Imamura sketches a picture of a Japan in marked contrast to its official image. It is the margins that interest the filmmaker, what manifests itself as divergent, regardless of its form, within the context of a modern technological society, the best example of this being Japan. Imamura seems to have adopted a type of counter-history. Hence the title of one of his documentaries *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess*, a

story that enmeshes the destiny of a former barmaid and prostitute in the country's history since 1945. The social schism revealed in the film, the barmaid is hardly interested in the destiny of her country of origin, is, like in many of Imamura's films, at the centre of the director's rapport with Japan. When he addresses the tragedy of Hiroshima (*Black Rain*), it is less the event that he presents than its human and social consequences. In particular, the consequences affecting certain characters in a village five years after the event, individuals struck by an abnormal "social handicap" and who suffer from a type of discrimination as a result of the event.

Whether it's through the story of a sexual deviant who makes a living from pornography in a repressed environment (*The Pornographers*), or the destiny of the heroic and grotesque brothel owner in South-East Asia at the turn of the Century (*Zegen*) or the protagonists of *Eijanaika* or *The Ballad of Narayama*, to name only a few examples, Imamura opposes the image of a triumphant, slick, unique Japan to that of a country wishing to erase from its veneer anything that could tarnish its shine. In a society where everything is done to efface individuals, Imamura presents characters who confront, with considerable lucidity and energy, a cultural and social context which tries to mold them according to a specific role or place. The opening shot of *Intentions of Murder* where a white rat circles round and round, prisoner in its cage, perfectly echoes the character's situation. Like Oshima and his fellow Japanese "New Wavers," Imamura foregrounds the repression of the serene world presented in Ozu's films.

In his *mise en scene*, there is a constant interaction between the individual and the collective, the particular and the general. Its illustration in terms of style are the sequence shots found at the beginning of *Pigs and Battleships*, of the port installations, the narrow streets, to the brothels or in *Eijanaika*, of the spectacles in the street, teeming with life, thieves, and pimps. They associate the individual to his environment, to a collective, to flows of energy and life that transport the individual. As well, Imamura likes tightly composed shots opposing foreground and background, creating thus an as

sociation or a fracture. In *Intentions of Murder*, the rape scene is filmed, not in the traditional shot-counter-shot way which opposes the rapist to his victim, but instead, it is constructed in a succession of shots that associate or link the protagonists, foreshadowing the “strange” or uncanny relation that will unite them for a short while.

Imamura shows how people deal with their surroundings, how they relate to the other, to history, to desire, how they perceive life and death. In doing so, he reveals a chain of connections (to adopt Charles Tesson’s terminology), a series of links, between human beings and things within or beyond their grasp, things that lift them up or pull them down and this renders any exclusive or even “noble” reading of Imamura’s films confusing if not impossible. Perhaps the image that best sums up his cinema is the final scene of *Vengeance is Mine*: a few years after the death of his own criminal son, the father, so hated by his child, disperses his ashes and his bones to the wind. In a freeze frame, Imamura arrests the bones between sky and earth, as though something of the son, the murderer, still revolts, an obscure part still resisting, an irretrievable fragment of him subsisting, a part not quite human, or perhaps, superhuman.



Streetscenes in *A Man Vanishes*

SHOHEI IMAMURA Interviewed By Toichi Nakata

*Toichi Nakata is a young Japanese director and film student living in England who made *Osaka Story* (1994), one of the most moving “personal documentaries” in recent memory. In this interview, he reveals, among many other things, how important Imamura’s work has been for the current generation of Japanese filmmakers.*

Shohei Imamura’s reputation in Japan has long been secure: he is acknowledged as one of the most important directors of the post-war period. In the West, however, few of his films were distributed until *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama Bushi-ko*) won the Palme d’Or at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival. In 1994, the Drambuie Edinburgh Film Festival mounted Britain’s most comprehensive retrospective of his work, spanning more than thirty years of filmmaking. I was attending the festival to present my own film *Osaka Story - A Documentary*, and had the pleasure of spending a lot of time with Imamura and his wife. This interview was recorded during their week in Scotland.

My first contact with Imamura dates back to the short time I attended his film school in Japan. This was launched in 1974 as the *Yokohama School of Broadcasting and Films*; it moved to its present base in Shin-Yurigaoka (outside Tokyo) in 1986, and is now known as the Japanese Academy of Visual Arts. Imamura remains its president and director. The films I now make are documentaries, and my interest in Imamura springs from the fact that he (unlike most feature directors anywhere) has given equal emphasis to fiction and non-fiction films in his own career. Indeed, several of his films play on the impossibility of knowing where “reality” ends and fiction begins. But whether he starts from a fictional story or a factual situation, his

work consistently tries to uncover fundamental truths about lower-class people, many of them outcasts from mainstream society.

Unlike his sometime mentor Yasujiro Ozu, often cited in the West as “the most Japanese of all Japanese directors,” Imamura has never been seen as offering stereotypical representations of Japan or Japanese people. Imamura’s characters, both real and fictional, tend to be loners and misfits. The way he looks at them is severe, but never without an underlying affection. As I am Japanese myself, I find that his films attain a deep understanding of the people who appear in them, people he knows well and loves dearly. In this sense, I find his films both very personal and immutably Japanese.

Shohei Imamura was born in downtown Tokyo in 1926, the third son in the family of a private doctor. Seeing Akira Kurosawa’s *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore Tenshi*) while he was a student made him determined to become a filmmaker. After majoring in Western History at Waseda University, he joined the Shochiku Company in 1951 and was assigned to work as an assistant director at its studios in Ofuna. The directors he worked under included Yasujiro Ozu, Masaki Kobayashi, Yoshitaro Nomura and Yuzo Kawashima. The Ozu films he worked on were *Early Summer* (*Bakushu*), *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (*Ochazuke no Aji*) and the masterpiece *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*), but it’s impossible to trace direct influences from Ozu in his work. The director he apparently learned most from in his days as an assistant was the anarchic Yuzo Kawashima; he edited a book of essays about Kawashima after the latter’s premature death in 1963.

Imamura moved from Shochiku to the newly re-established Nikkatsu Company in 1954. The revived company was recruiting young talent from all the other production companies at the time. Yuzo Kawashima also moved to Nikkatsu, and Imamura worked for him again. They co-wrote the film now considered Kawashima’s best, *Sun Legend of the End of the Tokugawa Era* (*Bakumatsu Taiyo-Den*), also known in English as *Shinagawa Path*; this was the first screenplay that Imamura worked on to be produced.

Imamura himself began directing in 1958. His first four films, inevitably, were company assignments made quickly and on low budgets. The fourth was *My Second Brother* (*Nianchan*), based on the best-selling diary of a ten-year-old girl living in Japan and describing her family’s struggles. This film was a critical and commercial success, but Imamura himself balked at its sentimentality and resolved to stop accepting assigned projects.

Ever since, he has followed his own path. In *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta to Gunkan*) he dealt with low-life gangsters and prostitutes operating around a US naval base. In *The Insect Woman* (*Nippon Konchuki*) and *Intentions of Murder* (*Akai Satsui*), he focused on strong-willed women battling against their apparently bleak destinies. He left Nikkatsu in 1966 and established his own company, Imamura Productions. His first independent production was an adaptation of Akiyuki Nosaka’s sardonic novel *The Pornographers*, which he retitled *Introduction to Anthropology* (*Jinruigaku Nyumon*). He went on to make the extraordinary *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen Johatsu*), which starts out as a documentary account of a search for a missing person and turns into a blend of fact and fiction unprecedented in world cinema. After spending nearly three years working on one of his greatest films, *Profound Desire of the Gods* (*Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo*), also known in English as *Kuragejima: Tales from a Southern Island*, he moved into making documentaries.

From *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (*Nippon Sengoshi: Madamu Omboro no Seikatsu*) to *Karayuki-san: The Making of a Prostitute* (*Karayuki-san*), Imamura’s documentaries all centre on real-life people who in many ways parallel the heroines and heroes of his fictions. Many of them are soldiers and “comfort women” who were forced to go to South-East Asian countries during the war and who have chosen to remain abroad. Through their personal histories and present-day plights, Imamura opens up many issues that have been ignored or covered up since the end of the Pacific War. It was while working on this series that Imamura founded his film school, the first of its kind in Japan.

Imamura's return to fiction with *Vengeance is Mine (Fukushu Suru Wa Ware Ni Ari)*, a film about a serial killer who hates his father, began to bring his work to wider international attention. His subsequent films have won him increasing acclaim: *Eijanaika* on Japan's opening to the outside world in the nineteenth century, the Cannes prizewinner *The Ballad of Narayama*, the provocative film about a trafficker in women, *Zegen*, and *Black Rain (Kuroi Ame)*, based on Masuji Ibuse's novel about the bombing of Hiroshima. At the time we spoke he was in pre-production for a new film, which he hopes to shoot in 1996 [*The Eel (Unagi)*].

Most of the following interview was recorded in two long sessions on 16 and 19 August 1994. The English critic and filmmaker Tony Rayns took part in the first of these sessions. I have also used some material from the Imamura Masterclass at the Edinburgh Film Festival, which was chaired by Rayns on 15 August. Imamura spoke in Japanese throughout, and this is my own translation of what he said.

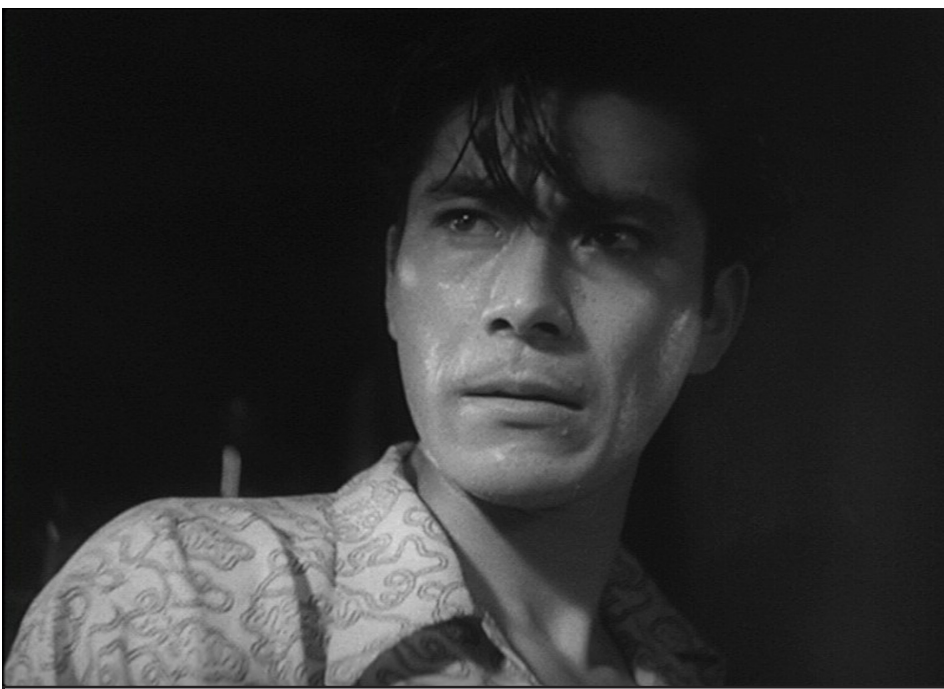
Toichi Nakata: *Can you sketch your beginnings in the Japanese film industry?*

Shohei Imamura: My eldest brother, he was twelve years older than me, was a stage actor. My father used to take me to see him at the famous Tsukiji Sho-Gekijo in Tokyo. Among the plays I remember seeing was the adaptation of Shunsaku Iwashita's novel *The Rickshaw Man (Muhomatsu no Issho)*, which was later filmed twice by Hiroshi Inagaki; I also recall seeing some German expressionist plays. My brother died in China during the war, but I think those childhood experiences of the theatre stayed with me. When I was in high school, my dream was to write plays and become a stage director.

I was eighteen when Japan lost the war in 1945. I won a place in Waseda University to read Western History, but I wasn't a diligent attendee of classes;

I spent most of my time working with a student theatre group and getting involved with the Communist movement. I was strongly against the continuation of the imperial system, and had many discussions with my friends about Hirohito's responsibility for the war. But my greatest obsession was individual freedom, the condition that the state had denied us absolutely during the war years, and I became fascinated by existentialism. At the time I was making a living from the black market: I bought illicit liquor and cigarettes from soldiers of the American occupation forces and sold them to my professors. That was the only time in my whole life when I was well off, although I spent all I made on drink. [*Laughter*] My parents had been evacuated from Tokyo to Hokkaido and hadn't yet returned, and so I was on my own and totally free. I was surrounded by prostitutes and other low-life types, who had a great influence on me. I thoroughly enjoyed those times.

I also saw quite a number of films around that time. At first, most of them were French or German. Then there was the tide of American films that flooded in to Japan after the war. But the film that shocked and moved me most was Akira Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel*. I found the gangster played by Toshiro Mifune incredibly real; he reminded me of people I'd met on the black market. I thought that Kurosawa must be a truly great director if he could make an actor as bad as Mifune look so real. And so when I graduated from the university in 1951, I was set on becoming an assistant to Kurosawa. Many of my friends meanwhile went into theatre work. But Kurosawa worked for the Toho Company, which was then in the throes of a prolonged strike. Consequently the company held no admission examination that year, and so I sat (and passed) the exam for the Shochiku company instead. Seven of us were taken on as assistant directors, and we drew lots to decide which director's crew we'd be assigned to. However, only six directors were working in the studio itself, and I was left the odd one out among the new recruits. I was told to wait around for Yasujiro Ozu, who was then filming on location in Nara.



Toshiro Mifune in *Drunken Angel*

What are your memories of working for Ozu?

I was an assistant on three of his films. There were five assistants in all, and I was the fifth and least of them. I was basically just a clapper boy, and Ozu barely acknowledged my existence. The first time he called me by name was towards the end of the filming of *Early Summer*. My mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage while I was working on Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. When I got back from her funeral, I found Ozu in the sound studio, dubbing the scene in which the grandmother (played by Chieko Higashiyama) is dying, also from a cerebral hemorrhage. I could not stand watching the scene over and over again, it reminded me so vividly of my mother's death, and so I ran out of the dubbing theatre and into the toilet, almost in tears. But Ozu followed me and came to urinate next to me. "Mr. Imamura," he asked, "is that what a cerebral hemorrhage looks like? Have I got it right?" At the time I thought

him incredibly cruel, but I later realized that a great filmmaker sometimes has to behave like that.

Obviously, Ozu was very different from Kurosawa. He was always calm, placid and well dressed. But I can't say I ever cared for his style of filmmaking. Many years later, on *Black Rain*, I was working with the cinematographer Takashi Kawamata, who had been an assistant cameraman on Ozu films. We had to keep telling each other not to shoot *Black Rain* like an Ozu film. On the other hand, after working on three films I came away with the conviction that Ozu was a great director. It was while working for him that I learned most of the basics of filmmaking, and I'm sure that everything I learned is reflected in the films I've made.

Why did you move from Shochiku to Nikkatsu?

Nikkatsu was newly re-established, and they approached me, I turned for advice to both Ozu and Yoshitaro Nomura, another Shochiku director I'd worked for, and both of them encouraged me to take up Nikkatsu's offer. They probably thought that I would have more of a chance at a go-ahead new studio than in Shochiku. One other factor that triggered my desire to move was the fact that I was dating the company administrator, who was the only woman working with sixty male assistant directors. I felt it would be easier to marry her if I left the company myself. She is now my wife. Compared with Shochiku, which was still a highly feudalistic company, Nikkatsu was remarkably free and energetic. It brought together young people from all the other major companies, Toho, Shin-Toho, Daiei, Toei and Shochiku, all of them looking to do something new and fresh. I felt more at ease in Nikkatsu.

That was when you teamed up with Yuzo Kawashima?

Yes, he came to Nikkatsu from Shochiku soon after me. I had worked for

him in Shochiku, while he was making a completely worthless film. I couldn't restrain myself from asking him why he was making such a stupid comedy. He looked me straight in the eyes and said: "For a living." Kawashima shared my interest in society's "lower dregs," but he had his own idiosyncratic way of looking at people and a strong sense of black comedy. He had a reputation for profligacy in his personal life. Between films, he would take off for Kyoto and spend weeks at a time drinking with young geisha girls. He'd then return to Tokyo with empty pockets and make another film to finance his next excursion. He was an outrageous man, and an extremely interesting one. Kawashima wasn't interested in the conventional grammar of film-making and he often used jump-cuts. I wrote *The Sun Legend of the End of the Tokugawa Era* for him and left many things in the script deliberately ambiguous, but he never paid any attention to the details anyway. That's the kind of man he was. The film's lead actor Frankie Sakai came to Kawashima and me separately to ask whether his character was really suffering from



Yuzo Kawashima

cancer or not, and we gave him different answers. Kawashima made a handful of masterpieces and plenty of flops. He died very suddenly in 1963, at the age of forty-five, but I remember him very clearly to this day.

Why did Nikkatsu let you become a director so soon after you joined the company?

One day three other assistant directors and I were called in by the studio head and told to write scripts for our first features. I was still in my sixth year as an assistant, and I'd always expected it would take ten years to be promoted. But this was obviously a fantastic opportunity, and so I began to work on a script that very evening. I decided to do something about prostitutes in the old red-light district of Yoshiwara. I thought this would definitely be right for me, since I knew a lot of prostitutes from my old black market days. But then I gave my outline to the studio head, he found it banal and uninteresting. I couldn't disagree with him, and so I abandoned the idea.

Then a producer recommended I read a story called *Tent Theatre* by Toko Kon. It was about a university drop-out who joined a traveling theatre troupe. My own student experiences made me identify with this character, and so I wrote a script based on the story. And that became *Stolen Desire (Nusumareta Yokujo)*, my first film as a director.

Looking back, your fifth film for Nikkatsu (Pigs and Battleships) seems like the first "authentic" Imamura film.

That's a film about dumb gangsters in Yokosuka, which was an important US naval base. These guys buy a herd of pigs from the GIs and fatten them up to sell them for a profit. I did a lot of research for the film, and got to know the world of these gangsters rather well. They were greedy and capable of every dirty trick in the book. As I got to know them, it struck me that although they always lived for the moment they had their own kind of

pride and enjoyed a kind of freedom all their own. They were pretty much like pigs, but at the same time very human. I ended up empathizing with them quite a lot.

One gangster harangued me. “Hey, Imamura,” he said, “you work pretty hard, but you don’t seem very comfortable on it. You can’t even afford a decent suit, can you? Look at my new shoes. Better than yours, aren’t they?” The same guy said to me, “it’s hard enough making ends meet when you work, Imamura, but it’s much harder not to work and still be well-off.” I got very annoyed when he said it, but I couldn’t deny that he had a point. I ended up using his words in the film.

I originally wanted 1,500 pigs for the climactic sequence of the gang fight in the middle of the red-light district, but we ran out of money. The head of Nikkatsu was furious with me. In the event I had to make do with only 400 pigs, including a lot of piglets. I had to do the best I could within the financial constraints.

After that, Nikkatsu wouldn’t let me direct again for three years. They thought that I would disobey their orders, and that I’d overspend. And so I had to bide time writing scripts for other directors, including *The Street with the Cupola* (*Kyupora no aru Machi*) for Kiriro Urayama. During that period I also wrote the play “Paraji”, which later became the basis for *The Profound Desire of the Gods*.

I was friendly with the writer Shinji Fujiwara; my third film *Endless Desire* (*Hateshinaki Yokubo*) was based on one of his stories. One night Fujiwara invited me for a drink and told me that he liked *Pigs and Battleships* but felt that it was somehow like a Kurosawa film; “large-scale and full of dramatic action scenes.” I told him I couldn’t see anything wrong with that. “I got into filmmaking because I wanted to be like Kurosawa,” I said, “and so I’m not sorry to hear that you think I’m getting there!” But Fujiwara went on to say that he was more interested in seeing an Imamura film than in finding

“the new Kurosawa.” Thanks to conversations like that, my ideas about filmmaking changed a lot during those three years when I wasn’t allowed to direct.

You mention your research quite often. Your approach reminds me of the way that documentary filmmakers need to research their projects before they begin. Can you say something about the way you do your research?

I’m interested in people: strong, greedy, humorous, deceitful people who are very human in their qualities and their failings. It may be that some of my fiction films look a bit like documentaries because I base my characters on research into real people. It was when I began to write scripts that I realized how much I needed to understand people. That’s why I began spending time in the university library (for the first time in my life!) at the age of thirty. I first tried to gain a sociological perspective and set out to analyze “reality” through social structures. It didn’t take me long to realize that this was very limiting, and so I turned my attention to social anthropology, which took me a lot further in my understanding of human beings. My films *The Insect Woman* and *Intentions of Murder* were founded on those researches.

But aren’t you also skeptical about social anthropology?

Of course, social anthropology doesn’t provide all the answers. A sociological perspective can be useful too, but that’s not enough in itself either. All scientific approaches have their limits. Above and beyond anything else, working as an artist means having a limitless curiosity about human beings. I have no interest in films made by directors who don’t care about people. At my film school, I often tell the students that it’s a place where they can learn about human beings. I’m happy if they graduate with an interest in knowing more about people. I tell them: “You could be a bartender or a prostitute. Whatever you do, though, be an interesting person.” Some of the students think I’m crazy.

The heroines of your films all counter the Western stereotype of the submissive Asian woman. Like Tome in The Insect Woman, all of your female characters are strong and determined...

In my opinion, Japanese women generally are like that. Women generally outlive men, which means amongst other things that they're stronger than men. I certainly find them more interesting than men. The women who have marked me most in life are the lower-class women I met during my black market days. They weren't educated and they were vulgar and lusty, but they were also strongly affectionate and they instinctively confronted all their own sufferings. I grew to admire them enormously. My wife is a bold, strong woman, too, and I respect her a great deal.

But you are from an upper middle-class background. Your father was a private doctor. What gave you such an empathy with working-class people?

I went to an elite junior high school, and some of my classmates went on to become government ministers. Many of them looked down on people in the medical profession (like my father), and even then they thought of themselves as being somehow above the law, or rather, as members of the social class that controlled the police force. I despised them, and remember thinking that they were the kind of people who would never get close to the fundamental truths of life. Knowing them made me want to identify myself with working-class people who were true to their own human natures. At that age, though, I probably still thought of myself as being innately superior to working-class people.

When Japan lost the war, I had to face personal hardship for the first time. In my black market days, I was basically looked after by prostitutes and bar hostesses and came to depend on them heavily. I also came to know everything that was good and bad about them, and realized how honest and instinctual they were, especially in comparison with my former classmates at school. I found myself feeling more and more at ease with them, and losing

any sense of superiority.

The first of your films to blur the line between fiction and fact was A Man Vanishes (Ningen Johatsu) which you made independently in 1967.

I made it for Imamura Productions, which I'd founded in 1965. The film was partly funded by the ATG (Art Theatre Guild), a small organization which invested in and distributed low-budget independent features. My original intention was to investigate twenty-six cases of men who had disappeared, but it soon became clear that one case alone would be quite complicated enough to deal with. I centered the film on the case of Tadashi Oshima, who disappeared in 1965 while on a business trip. I learned about him through meeting his fiancée Yoshie Hayakawa, and I soon guessed that Oshima had vanished because he wanted to get out of his obligation to marry her.

How did you go about researching it?

I always try to talk to people myself as much as I can. That can get boring, but sometimes I sense that there's something that needs to be explored further behind what they're saying. While making *A Man Vanishes*, my crew and I stayed in the room next door to Yoshie Hayakawa for a whole year. She had every imaginable bad quality, and none of us could really stand her. And yet I wanted to understand why I found her so disturbing, and that was enough to keep me going.

Did you ever think twice about using hidden cameras and exposing her and other people's private feelings in public?

Yoshie Hayakawa gave her explicit consent to being filmed. She took leave from her job to be in the film, and we paid her a salary. In other words, she approached the project as a job and she took on the role of an actress in front of the camera. She used the camera as much as we used her as subject. Of course, there are serious ethical questions involved. Hayakawa didn't know

what the film's outcome would be, but we behind the camera didn't know where reality was going to lead us either. I'm not sure myself if the use of hidden cameras was justified, and I have to admit that the finished film did hurt Hayakawa's feelings. These are difficult areas, and I have no glib answers. As a filmmaker, though, I did what I had to do to see the film through completion. I put the needs of the film first. I had no other choice, really.

After A Man Vanishes, you made one more fiction feature (The Profound Desire of the Gods) and then switched to making documentaries for the next nine years. What happened?

The filming of *Profound Desire of the Gods* took place on Ishigaki Island in the Okinawan archipelago, and it was originally scheduled to last for six months. But six months got dragged out to one year, and then eighteen months. I had a great time on this remote island and got on very well with the local people. I had immersed myself in Okinawan folklore and tradition. But my actors and actresses couldn't stand the protracted filming and began complaining about being stuck on the island for so long. I'd never had my problems working with actors before, but on this occasion their complaints made me really fed up. Funny enough, I was so fed up that I lost all desire to make fiction films for many years.

Also, I came out of *A Man Vanishes* with a feeling that fiction, no matter how close to reality, could never be as truthful as unmediated documentary. And documentary seemed a better vehicle for my unending desire to get close to people's true natures. I started with *A History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* in 1970, and then devoted myself to documentaries for some nine years. No actors to worry about. I simply traveled around with a skeleton crew; often just one cameraman and one sound recordist.

In Search of Unreturned Soldiers (Mikikan-hei o otte) was about former soldiers of the Japanese army who chose not to return to Japan after the war. I found several of them who had remained in Thailand. Two years later, I

invited one of them to make his first return visit to Japan and documented it in *Private Fujita Comes Home (Muhomatsu Kokyo ni Kaeru)*. During the filming, my subject Fujita asked me to buy him a cleaver so that he could kill his "vicious brother." I was shocked, and asked him to wait a day so that I could plan how to film the scene. By the next morning, to my relief, Fujita had calmed down and changed his mind about killing his brother. But I couldn't have had a sharper insight into the ethical questions provoked by this kind of documentary filmmaking.

In 1975 I went to Malaysia to look for Japanese women who had been sent to South-East Asia during the war to serve as prostitutes for the Japanese troops. These women were known as Karayuki-san. While researching the project, I met around twenty old ladies who had been Karayuki-san, but none of them seemed right for the film. And then I met Kikuyo Zendo, a gentle old lady of seventy, who came from the family of a poor farmer in the Hiroshima area, and she became the focus of *Karayuki-san: The Making of a Prostitute*. She was very open with us from the start, but I had to ask her a series of shockingly direct questions: "How many men did you have to sleep with every night?" "Did you enjoy sex with your clients?" and so on. Despite everything, she remained astonishingly kind and tolerant towards us.

For my part, though, I was less and less sure that I could justify asking her such questions. I had to ask myself whether or not I was exploiting her, whether or not I had good enough reasons to expose her past in public, and whether or not I really understood her feelings. I also found myself wondering whether documentary was really the best way to approach these matters. I came to realize the presence of the camera could materially change people's lives. Did I have the right to effect such changes? Was I playing God in trying to control the lives of others? I'm in these matters. I came to realize the presence of the camera could materially change people's lives. Did I have the right to effect such changes? Was I playing God in trying to control the lives of others? I'm in no way a sentimental humanist, but thoughts like these scared me and made me acutely aware of the limitations of documen-

tary filmmaking.

During the nine years I made documentaries, I was basically supported by my wife, who ran a company producing artwork for animation films. No one can make a living directing documentaries for Japanese television. In fact, it's impossible to make documentaries at all unless you are ready to sacrifice many things in your personal life.

So those were the considerations that led you back to fiction filmmaking with Vengeance is Mine in 1979?

It grew out of an increasing frustration: there were many things I wanted to express that were beyond the reach of a documentary. A filmmaker named Azuma Fujisaki drew my attention to a novel by Ryuzo Saki based on the real-life story of a serial killer. I read it and found it very provocative, but I couldn't immediately see any way of turning it into a dramatic film. Then I started researching the facts of the case for myself. That took me a year, and I came up with some details that had escaped Saki and the police. By the time I'd finished, I was confident that I could write a script that would incorporate a lot of documentary elements in the story. Making *Vengeance is Mine*, I particularly enjoyed the freedom I had to tell the actors what I wanted from them, a freedom that doesn't exist in documentary filmmaking. The film went on to be a critical and commercial success, and it enabled me to get the ownership of my house back from the bank.

Shichiro Fukazawa's story The Ballad of Narayama was first filmed by Keisuke Kinoshita in 1958. He used stage conventions and color schemes from the kabuki theatre. Why did you decide to remake the story in a more realistic way?

I saw Kinoshita's version when I was still working as an assistant director and I was impressed by the way he used stylized sets and traditional music. But I always had the feeling that this story could be told in another way. In

my version, I wanted to focus on the day-to-day lives of these mountain villagers, and particularly on the hard, physical work they have to do, and on their sex lives.

Is it true that you originally planned to open the film with a present-day sequence?

While I was working on the script, I had the idea of starting with a scene in modern Japan. There's an upper middle-class family with an elderly grandmother who is to be taken to an old people's home up a mountain. We see the father driving her in his Mercedes Benz and arriving at this expensive, high-tech institution. The other family members say goodbye to Grandma, promising to visit her again soon, and she waves them goodbye. As the car drives away, another old woman, a long-term resident, asks Grandma if the family said they'd be back to see her soon. "Of course," says Grandma. The old woman laughs and says: "No, they never come back." And then the title *The Ballad of Narayama* comes up.

Why did you drop the idea?

I was very attached to that idea, film as some kind of polemic if I used it. Of course, I did want to imply that this kind of abandonment of the elderly is a fact of life in present-day Japan, but I wanted the film to have other dimensions too. On balance, I think I was right to drop it.

Was there a connection between the success of Narayama and the relaunch of your film school as The Japan Academy of Visual Arts?

Yes, the income from the film's distribution enabled us to move from the old premises in Yokohama to the custom-built premises in Shin-Yurigaoka, which opened in 1986. We began offering a three-year course, which gave us a better status in the eyes of the government. I founded the school in the first place because my father always taught me that I should do something

for young people when I reached the age of fifty. Because the old studio system of entrance examinations and apprenticeships broke down in the 1970s, it was important to give young people an alternative way to learn the skills necessary to become filmmakers.

Would your own career have been different if you had been to a film school rather than trained in a film company's studio?

The old studio training system had both good and bad sides. The Shochiku studios in particular were very conservative and had a very rigid pecking order. Once you were assigned to one director's crew, it was impossible to move to another's. The system there actively discouraged innovation and initiative. But I learned a huge amount, both consciously and unconsciously, by working under Ozu for three years. If I'd started as an independent filmmaker or gone to a film school, very probably my approach to cinema would have been different. At that time, though, the film studio route was the only option open to me.

Is there any difference in approach when you work from your own original screenplay rather than adapting a literary source?

It usually takes me around ten years to get from an original idea to a finished film. And it takes between twelve and eighteen months to write a script, whether it's an original or an adaptation. Before writing any script, I spend a lot of time doing research, and that process modifies the original idea, especially if it's from someone else's work. And so it actually makes little difference whether I start from my own idea or from a novel or story. One exception to that general rule is *Black Rain*, which I based on two books by Masuji Ibuse: *Kuroi Ane* and *Yohai Taicho*. I've always admired Ibuse's writing, and I liked those books so much that I changed very little when writing the script.

Does that explain why Black Rain seems different from your other films?



Black Rain (Kuroi Amer)

Everyone tells me that *Black Rain* is so calm and restrained compared with my previous films, but I think I'm just making films that are suitable for a man of my age.

What's the project you're working on now?

It's called *Doctor Akagi (Kanzo Sensei)*. Towards the end of the Pacific War, there's an old doctor nicknamed Kanzo Sensei who diagnoses everyone suffering from hepatitis. The Japanese army accuses him of squandering precious resources when he prescribes glucose injections for all his patients, believing all of them to be malnourished. It tells the story of his exploits in those chaotic months when Japan was losing the war. I've been working on the script with my son Daisuke Imamura (who writes and directs films himself under the name Daisuke Tengan), and I hope to start shooting soon. But I haven't yet raised all the money I'll need.

Isn't it easier to raise money now that your films have an international audience?

No, the strength of the Japanese yen makes it particularly hard to attract foreign investors.

What advice do you give to young filmmakers like me and your own son?

The same advice I always give to my students at the school: stick with human beings. Be curious about them and interested in what they can reveal to you. All people are complex and strange and hard to fathom. But until you really examine them closely, it's impossible to find out what really makes them tick. For instance, you may think you know your parents well from having lived with them for most of your life. But try changing your angle of perception: try seeing them as a struggling middle-aged couple. When you watch them carefully, you start to see how complicated they are. That's your starting point. And once you begin to see people's hidden depths, you can probably begin to sense how interesting all of us are.



Doctor Akagi in *The Eel* (Kanzo Sensei, 1987)

MY TEACHER

By Shohei Imamura



Yuzo Kawashima

I recently received a visit from Marco Müller. He told me that he wanted to include four or five films by Yuzo Kawashima in the program for the coming Rotterdam Film Festival and he asked me which ones I recommended. I suggested *Suzaki Paradisu - Akashingo* (1956), *Bakumatsu Taiyoden* (1957), *Onna Wa Nido Umareru* (1961) and *Shitoyakana Kemono* (1962). Müller, known for his persistence, after informing me that those films had already been selected, asked me: “How do you see Kawashima’s position in Japanese cinema?” I had to give him the following, evasive answer: “It’s very difficult to say. Even the Japanese critics find it hard to categorize his work.”

Yuzo Kawashima died in 1963 at the age of forty-five. By that time he had made fifty films. The first twenty-four of these were made as “program pictures” for the Shochiku studios, and the last eighteen for Toho and Daiei. During the intervening period he made eight films for Nikkatsu, with me as his assistant director. In those days, Nikkatsu consisted of a motley group of young directors who had come from Toho, Shochiku, Daiei and other studios. Perhaps because of his restless need for independence, he was the first to leave Shochiku; he preferred to work with assistant directors who were not from this studio. Still, for some reason or other, he ended up working with me.

Kawashima was completely different from the so-called great directors who always strive for perfection. He had an extremely distorted way of looking at the world. He abhorred and mocked exaggeration at all times. He was always against authority and striving to eliminate hypocrisy. This was al-

ready the case when he made those program pictures for Shochiku. Even in these rather mediocre films he rebelled against the studio, which in those days was a powerful machine that controlled distribution and promotion as well as production. That was simply his nature, and because he did not necessarily follow the trends of the day, this excellent comedy director was not always popular with his employers. He was often dismissed as an eccentric or a drunkard doomed to failure, though it must be admitted that there was that side to him as well.

When we filmed Jiro Osaragi's novel *The Balloon (Fusen)*, which had been serialized in *Asahi Shinbun*, Japan's most prestigious newspaper, Kawashima and I, as his assistant screenwriter, adapted it for the screen. To celebrate the beginning of shooting, we had invited Osaragi to a small party in a *ryokan* (Japanese inn) in Atami, (popular health resort with hot springs near Tokyo). Before the party was well under way, Kawashima suddenly shouted, "Hey, Tengu Kurama!" Osaragi is a prominent figure in the literary world. He has written about the Dreyfus affair, and he has studied the French Revolution intensively. Well versed in all things concerning the Meiji Restoration (1868), he reached a large audience with a series of popular novels about Tengu Kurama. When he was shouted at this way, the startled Osaragi stopped drinking. "You may think you have a big chest, but that's no reason to beat it like that," Kawashima shouted. The producer turned as pale as a sheet and tried to intervene by assuring Osaragi that this always happened when Kawashima was drunk. Osaragi laughed heartily, and the whole thing blew over. I don't know why Kawashima made this provocative remark. Perhaps Osaragi, after reading the screenplay, had said something bordering on criticism, but I don't remember this. Perhaps the sight of this important man, sitting with his back to the *tokonoma* and drinking his cups of sake in a very proper manner, was unbearable to Kawashima and aroused his in-born rebelliousness, but in this case he had reacted rather impetuously. They had met only half an hour before, so it seemed as if he was trying to pick a fight with Osaragi for no reason at all. But it's also possible, knowing Kawashima's deep aversion to authority and hypocrisy, that he had detected

something in Osaragi's work or conversation that provoked this crude outburst. You see he had a different, truly menacing look in his eyes whenever he quarreled with someone. When you watch his films, you first start to think, "There is something intriguing here, this is a nearly perfect film," and then suddenly everything falls apart and becomes incoherent. That's the way he does things: removing the connections and destroying the unity himself. There is only one way I can explain this: because he hated to be judged by the perfection of his films, he wanted to show that he could turn them into a shambles whenever he wanted to. That was probably a deeply rooted character trait.

I know of no other director who reveals so much of himself in his work. The *Nuberu Bagu* (Japanese New Wave), influenced by the French *Nouvelle Vague*, began at Shochiku, the most authoritarian and traditional studio of the day. Kawashima's early revolt against Shochiku's authority is precisely the reason why young people are once again taking an interest in his work. He personified the *Nuberu Bagu* ten years before its emergence. In my opinion, Kawashima's work deserves to be more appreciated, in Japan as well as abroad.

The Sun Legend of a Country Boy

By Shohei Imamura

- From *Sayonara dake ga Jinsei da: Eiga kantoku Kawashima Yuzo no Shogai (Life is but Farewell: The Life of Film Director Kawashima Yuzo)*, edited by Shohei Imamura, Noberu Shobo, 1969 (revised edition: 1976).

Kawashima and I had a “master-apprentice” relationship from my time at Shochiku until the end of my stint at Nikkatsu, from my twenty-seventh until my thirty-second year. But in no way did our relationship within the group have the customary significance.

The Kawashima group had the reputation of being a bunch of drunkards, and it’s true there was some heavy drinking. At our nocturnal drinking bouts there were lively discussions, a lot of noise, and deep emotional clashes. Looking back, I think that things were different for the two of us. We usually sat drinking together quietly, thinking of something else or nothing at all. Kawashima’s drinking seemed to stem from an emptiness in his heart, while the alcohol aggravated his physical infirmity. I myself always drank with him, partly because I wanted to drink, and partly out of special consideration for him. Once I had to comfort him, I don’t remember why. As I found the whole thing embarrassing, I pretended not to have noticed and got drunk myself first. It is an unpleasant memory.

I had met Kawashima before our collaboration began, because we had the same landlady. He saw this as a reason to promote me to drinking buddy. At the time there was a restaurant across the street from Shochiku’s Ofuna Studios, called Matsuo, where Minoru Shibuya, Keisuke Kinoshita, Yuzo Kawashima, Yoshitaro Nomura and a couple of others were regulars. The household where we boarded consisted solely of women, so Kawashima was the man of the house and their protector. But the Kawashima group was usually behind schedule, and shooting seldom ended on the appointed date. Kawashima generally came home in the small hours, so his role as

protector didn’t amount to much. Besides, he was too weak physically and he drank too much. At the time I still belonged to the Ozu group, which always finished work on time. As soon as I went to live in the same house, I became the second protector. The Kawashima group often dropped by when they had finished working and were going out to have a drink, and that’s how I got to know Kawashima.

One day a colleague told me that Kawashima was going to make a film called *Tonkatsu Taisho* (directed in 1952), and that I would be working on it. I had resolved, however, to call silliness by its proper name. It doesn’t matter if a director of silly films turns out to be quite smart in everyday life. So I turned the job down without hesitation. It’s true that I already thought Kawashima had a kind of self-assurance that the Ofuna directors lacked, but I remember my feelings of rebellion at the thought of making silly films “because you have to make a living.”

After Nikkatsu reopened (in 1954), assistant directors from Shochiku like Katsumi Nishikawa, Hiroshi Noguchi, Kiyoshi Horiike, Ko Nakahira, Buichi Saito and Seijun Suzuki went over to that studio. A little later I joined them as the youngest of the group. Around that time, when I was still with Shochiku, I heard that Kawashima was making films like *Shinjitsu Ichiro* and *Kino To Asu No Aida* (both filmed in 1954, based on the novels of two “serious” writers: Yasushi Inoue and Yuzo Yamamoto). I thought: “So he can do that as well!” I went to see *Kino To Asu No Aida* as soon as possible, but I found the methods used in the making of the film rather conventional. He had certainly managed to extract pretty exciting performances from mediocre actresses such as Chikage Awashima and Yumeji Tsukioka, and to give the film warmth. Since I like films full of tension and enthusiasm, I felt a degree of sympathy, but I also saw traces of cheap tricks. These seemed to be intended for his colleagues or for the studio rather than for the audience. This should be improved, I told Keinosuke Kubo, who was assistant producer at that time.

In 1954, Kawashima went over to Nikkatsu. His first film for this studio

was *Ai No Onimotsu*, made in the same year. He seemed to want to break away from his past, and refused to work with anyone who had worked for Shochiku. However, no one else was available, so I became his assistant, whether he liked it or not. After that I worked with him as his chief assistant for three or four years, and went out drinking with him. Kiriro Urayama, another drunkard, was his second assistant during this period. When we were shooting *Ashita Kuru Hito* (in 1955), the studio began to impose strict limitations on the length of feature films. We had to film Ryuzo Kikujima's script using no more than 9,000 feet of film (approximately 100 minutes). Kawashima and I were staying in Izu at the time, and there we decide to condense the narrative while still trying to do justice to Yasushi Inoue's style. As assistant screenwriter, I wrote an abridged version which didn't really alter the structure of Kikujima's script. Since that time, our collaboration never ended in an argument. When I became a director a year later and collaborated with the screenwriters Hisashi Yamauchi and Keiji Hasebe, our discussions invariably turned into arguments, or something very similar. I think Kawashima's ability not to let a discussion deteriorate into a quarrel is due to the experience he acquired at the Ofuna Studio.

Kawashima was the kind of man who sleeps through the day and becomes active at night. I had the healthy habit of being an early riser. While he was still asleep, I was already busy re-examining the structure of the script and thinking of ways to improve its weak spots. I went from one problem to another, like a student preparing for an exam. I copied everything by hand and put the papers under a paperweight at the spot where he later would be sitting. When he woke up in the evening and came by, he looked at what I had done, and we would discuss everything together. Although I prepared my views well until my brain creaked, his opinion always defeated mine in the end. When I came up with yet another idea, he would merely say: "uninteresting," or "too long." I found this rather irritating and I'd think to myself: "I only get half as much sleep as you do, so I spend much more time thinking about these things." When I refused to give in and said: "I still prefer my idea," he would sit down at the desk without answering me.

The result was always shorter and more interesting than my scribbling. Too bad, but that's the way it was. I often had this sad experience in those days. I hardly insisted or stuck to my own point of view, so we never had disputes about it. "Discussion is superfluous. Just make the film and shut up, that's the only way to learn," that was what Ofuna had done to him. All the same, I was often tempted to use counter-arguments like: "Say what you like, you're the one who staged that awful swordfight in *Aibore Tokoton Doshi*." Still, compared to the period in which he made that movie, he exuded a lot more willpower in those days.

When we filmed *The Balloon (Fusen)* based on the novel by Jiro Osaragi, Kawashima said: "Let's Start by reading the book very critically." This seems an obvious thing to do, but it was customary to use Kawashima's own ideas indiscriminately. Now he was suddenly enthusiastic about using a discussion concerning content as our starting point. By that time, I was also finally convinced that Kawashima did prepare his films thoroughly. While reading the novel, I concentrated on the cynical minor character, the son of a Japanese master painter, who worked for the military intelligence and later owned a nightclub. "In order to penetrate more deeply into the human soul, it would perhaps be better to make him our main character," I suggested. "Perhaps, but it is a novel about the relationship between a father and his daughter," Kawashima replied, and again I gave up all hope immediately. I figured that the term "critically" lost all meaning this way. Two months later we had completed the first version of the script. It followed the original story faithfully, without fresh lines of approach, and still had the same protagonist. "Oh well, we couldn't get much more out of it," Kawashima said. After the opening night, Osaragi praised *The Balloon* in the *Asahi Shinbun* as one of the best screen adaptations of his novels, and as a triumph of Kawashima's youthful spirit.

For *The Balloon* we needed a scene in which the actress Izumi Ashikawa, who played the female lead, a woman who had been crippled by polio, had to walk. "How should we get her to play this?" I wondered. I could see that

Kawashima wasn't sure either. As this affected him personally, I was very curious. When we wrote the screenplay, we had left the nature of her handicap undecided. We had conferred extensively on the acting, and had usually avoided effects that weren't clear. That's why I thought it would be better to have her disabled in her legs; it was a scene in which she walked, after all, rather than in the hands with which she held the paper bag. While I was explaining the scene to Ashikawa, Kawashima asked in an irritated manner: "What'll it be?" "What do you think?" I said. "Wouldn't it be a little unclear if we decide on the hands?" "Oh, well..." he said. "Wouldn't it be better if she limped?" I insisted. "No, her hands are enough, let's go for the hands. Action!" And that's how it turned out. Still, the scene remained unclear, so we added her dropping the contents of her handbag. When we were still working on the screenplay, I was very impressed by Kawashima's qualities, and often felt helpless. But now I thought: "He feels just as helpless."

Kawashima was popular with many actresses. Many men attract women through their weaknesses and sensitivities. Yoko Minamida once said: "The nape of his neck drives me crazy." Another actress said about him: "I can't stand upright when he stares at me." I often thought they shouldn't have told *me* these things. It's usually the director who rides the actors hard, and the assistant director who plays a conciliatory part, but in our case, with the Kawashima group, I was the one who shouted at the actors, while Kawashima was the one who soothed them. "You're too weak, you should let them know who's boss," he used to say, and as usual it became my job to apply the whip. He was nice to the actors himself, and usually let them do what they wanted. Sometimes things went wrong because of this, and when I asked him, playfully but seriously, "Wasn't this a little too much?" he would brush aside my objections. He hated to be too critical about every single film he made. His aim seemed to be to make a lot of films, to make money to live on, while trying to achieve something within that oeuvre. Kawashima has always said that *Suzaki Paradaisu – Akashingo* was the film he liked the best, but I think his preference was mainly a reaction to the poor box office returns and the bad reviews. It's true that the intimate atmosphere of Yoshiko Shibaki's novella is caught very well, but as a whole the film is too

literary. In the opening scene we see the desolate red light district Suzaki Paradaisu (Suzaki Paradise) from a bus, and the couple who have fallen on bad times. The chilly atmosphere is extremely convincing, and the refreshing way in which Kawashima has juxtaposed several shots that aren't really compatible is excellent.

Michiyo Aratama played the desperate woman who has given up her life as a prostitute. "Let's go and take a look in the red light district," I said to her, but she didn't go. I didn't like her superficial style and acting, and told Kawashima: "Get her to act more forcefully," but he didn't reply and didn't straighten her out. When he wandered through the red light district with us, he kept emphasizing how different it was from the Suzaki he had known before the war. I didn't know what it looked like before the war, but the neighbourhood must have made the same godforsaken impression then. It seemed to me he had superimposed overlapping images of red light districts from the Edo (1605-1867) and Meiji (1868-1912) eras on it.

He told me that once, in another red light district, he had found a woman who pleased him so much that he went back to look for her the next day. Because he had been drunk the night before and didn't know where to find her, it was pointless to look for her. "And she was so wonderfully pliant," he added. I think he was pleased that his search was pointless. It was as if he was talking about a woman in his dreams. When he was drunk, he sometimes introduced me to women he liked. I bragged that I knew all there was to know about women. I made up stories, and he half seemed to believe me. Then he invited me to give my opinion on a certain woman, and introduced me to the woman he fancied, who was later to become his widow. "Well, what do you think?" He forced me to answer. "Not bad," I said, and Kawashima was silent. After a while he said: "I'm thinking about living with her in the future." "You mean marry her?" I asked. "Marry her? Out of the question. I meant as my mistress," he replied. Four or five times a week he was as drunk as a lord, so I dragged him over to the Totoya Hotel in Shinjuku (district in Tokyo), where I left him in the hands of the liftboy. When he moved from the hotel to a Nikkatsu apartment, he was having a

talk with the studio's art director about his furniture. "When Yuzo Kawashima starts having household things in his apartment, it means he's finished," I needled him, but oddly enough he took this seriously and really lost his temper.

It was said that his spirit had overcome his physical handicap, but I was not convinced. The truth is that his disease (atrophy of the muscles) became worse as the years went on. He fought against it with all his might, and allowed himself wry jokes out of his fear of death, which, as he foresaw, wasn't too far off. When we were working on that screenplay of *Bakumatsu Taiyoden* in Izu, an elderly masseuse came up to me one night to complain about Kawashima's behaviour; "I didn't sleep a wink last night because of that gentleman next door. All I said was that he was too skinny and hard to massage, and he lost his temper and got up right away. No matter how many times I apologized, he insisted that I had mocked him, and wouldn't calm down." He can't have been that drunk that evening, so the masseuse's innocent remark must have really hurt him deeply. It seems that in his last year he was plagued by a fatigue that, combined with his increasing paralysis and weakening lungs, made it impossible for him to sleep. How did he succeed in leaving behind such an impressive oeuvre in spite of this? If it wasn't "because he had to make a living," then perhaps it was "because he wanted luxury." Or was it because he was well-bred, good-natured and simply couldn't ignore the wishes and demands of the studios? Fear, alcohol, women, wastefulness, mediocre work, ill health: all this was the end of him and drove him to his death. Despite the fact that he was going downhill, he made no attempt to change his dissipated lifestyle, taken over from Sakunosuke Oda. If anything, it pleased him that people with common sense frowned upon it. "Life is one long goodbye," he would mumble courageously.

In spite of all this, one thing is certain: he has won himself a very special place within the heterogeneous group of Japanese film directors. I joined Kawashima's widow to transport his ashes to his native soil in the Aomori province. He was the third son of an old merchant family in Tanabe, a town

in the Shimokita area, and appears to have had a very strict father. The cinema was the only cultural amenity in town. The network of powerful blood ties within the village community was suffocating, and filled the boy with hatred. He rebelled against his home by wanting to become a writer and a film fanatic while still an adolescent. Later on he studied literature at Meiji University, ended up at Shochiku and immersed himself in the world of film without looking back. He only visited his home town a couple of times, at more or less ten-year intervals. Even during the war, when despite the famine in the cities there was still enough food in the Aomori countryside, he couldn't overcome his hatred of his native region and didn't return. Kawashima's love of vulgarity, which he regards as lying at the root of his dilettante interest in the Edo era and his wanderings through red light districts, was the other side of his distaste for the stingy and provincial mentality of the farmers. Kawashima was unfamiliar with *Rakugo* story *Saheheiji Who Stayed Behind (Inokori Saheiji)*. A director from Tokyo remarked at the time: "Kawashima made his *Sun Legend (Bakumatsu Taiyoden)* with the longing look of a country boy. That's why it's so surprising that he succeeded, without knowledge of the *Rakugo* story, in analyzing and dissecting this material, and reconstructing it in such an exemplary fashion. A citizen of Tokyo experiences the atmosphere of Edo (until 1868 the name for Tokyo) every day, and embodies it. But the dilettante Kawashima dissects and explains Edo in a way that leaves Tokyo's citizens wide-eyed with astonishment. Just as someone from the countryside studies a map of Tokyo in order to understand the city, Kawashima studied Edo in order to penetrate its essence. I think this is nonsense. Doesn't it go without saying that you dissect your material before you start on a film? You can't accomplish anything without research or study. The writing of a screenplay especially is something which can't be done without analysis, dissection and composition: in short, without painstaking labour. The fact that it is a film about Edo, made by a provincial, doesn't describe the film adequately.

Sun Legend should have been much more grandiose and interesting. We should have succeeded in genuinely criticizing and ridiculing the semi-revolutionary Meiji Restoration (1868), brought about by provincial lower samu-

rai, from the point of view of simple city dwellers who are also without means or prestige. We should have used a less schematic and more sensual method of criticizing the existing authorities and the new authorities who wanted to overthrow them. We should have shown how the Citizens of Edo, in spite of their proverbial frivolousness, revolted against oppression. When, during the writing of the screenplay, I asked him what the film was really about, Kawashima answered: "About the positive flight," but I didn't have the faintest idea what he meant by this. In any case, this film is essential for an understanding of Kawashima. Saheiji, the main character in the film, has a very rebellious spirit, suffers from a fear of consumption, a weak spot he hides from others, and lives according to the principle that "no one can be trusted." Isn't he the composite image of Kawashima and his father? Kawashima's father was a man who never asked for help and never returned it: a surly, self-reliant man who never renounced his "class."

Though a merchant, he wasn't above doing his own cleaning or sewing; he was someone who acquired new knowledge impulsively. Add to this Kawashima himself, who fought every day against the genetic factors that slumbered in his blood, who never showed anyone his weakness, who rebelled against authority, who spoke his mind, even if it didn't happen often, and who found his own niche while going around four film studios. There was a sequel to the Saheiji character in Kawashima's *Kashima Ari*. The character (also played by Frankie Sakai) who could translate, repair clocks, was good with machinery and even managed very well in the kitchen, a jack of all trades, is Kawashima's ideal image. Not a well-groomed, clean-cut boy so much as a clever one. Cultured people reek of excess and wastefulness, while clever people don't have this problem. They are on their guard, extremely pragmatic, and have a very sober sense of judgment. Cultured people aren't rational; clever people are. Kawashima himself possessed both characteristics.

Four or five days before he died, we met in Roppongi, a district of Tokyo, and talked about this. He changed the subject and started to criticize my

film *The Insect Woman*. We got to talking about the female lead, played by an actress from a farming village in Yonezawa, and about the lullaby she sings in the film. Suddenly Kawashima said: "Do you know the *Tsugaru shamisen*? I bet you don't. It goes like this...." And though he usually didn't sing very loudly, this time he really let rip. "Chan, chan, chanka chanka," he sang, imitating the sound of the *shamisen* with his voice. He didn't sing it in a gloomy, heavy-handed or restrained way, but changed it into an airy melody with a jazz beat that showed Tsugaru in a whole new light. Perhaps this was his oblique criticism of the films I made in those days, in which I used remote regions as background for a lot of pretentious concern about incestuous relationships within the families of our frustrated society. He didn't know the tune very well, because he stopped after repeating a few bars several times, without showing any of the usual shame at his mediocre performance. Besides, I thought his tune was a fair description of the way I saw Tsugara myself. When I told him this, he looked as if he had expected me to say the opposite. He drank his whisky with a poker face. Without a doubt, he was someone who lived his forty-five years to the full.



Imamura-san directing *Intentions of Murder*

IMAMURA SHOHEI
A MAN VANISHES



My Approach To Filmmaking

By Shohei Imamura

*I*mmamura wrote the following more than three decades ago, having made only his first three features, and, though his approach would later become more complex than suggested here, the statement remains an apt and illuminating credo for his art.

I don't like to talk of theory; it's not a good way of describing what I want to make films about. Theory-based artworks, for all their logic, are unlikely to move us. In my case, the techniques, which I use, cannot be theorized. When I look at life through my viewfinder, I choose long shot when I want long shot and close-up when I want close-up.

I believe that the value of a work depends largely on the supporting idea. That's why, when I make a film, I always collaborate on the screenplay. I like to work on the script from scratch, from the first idea the writer had. My feeling is that the quality of the film depends seventy per cent on the story, and the quality of that story depends on the subject. When we have chosen the subject, the story is three-quarters written.

So what do we mean when we talk about the "idea" for a film? Film theorists talk about "ideas" in the movies, but they mean by this the opposite of what I do. For me, the idea for the film lies in its attitude to human beings. In my case, this attitude is one of obsession, almost total focus. In my work, people take centre stage. I am much more interested in mankind than I am in other filmmakers. There are no shots in my films, which do not contain human action. There are no empty landscapes or unmotivated cuts. Nakahira uses them very seldom, but I, even less so.

The reason I work this way is to avoid the trap of only *explaining* a character. In my work I want to do more than that, I want to enter the character's heart. I want to capture the smallest action, the finest nuance; the most intimate psychological expression because filmmakers must concern themselves with more than facades. Thus, when I use close-up shots, my camera gets as close as it can.

I love all the characters in my films, even the loutish and frivolous ones. I want every one of my shots to express this love.

After the script is completed, the next stage is what I call the technical editing. At this stage, we do a read-through with the actors, which involve carefully rehearsing the scenes. When "something" happens, and it is worth shooting, and provided it can be restaged, I start shooting, making this "something" mine.

Apart from these serendipitous incidents, I do not try to invent anything new for each sequence. Once the cast is acting freely, and once I'm satisfied that the camera operator understands their movements, I'll then decide about the best place from, which their action can be viewed, about distance and about whether it is better to go closer.

In short, my method can be called "workman-like." I have no time for new angles for the sake of new angles. The difference between my way of shooting and that of the old filmmakers is that I freely observe human beings, like in newsreels. I choose the angle which most clearly illuminates the characters' dilemmas.

I often wonder if others are as obsessed by people as I am. I am single-minded in this, and even a master filmmaker's oeuvre, well conceived and beautifully detailed, will not move me if it does not contain this obsession.

My early, shocking discovery when I worked with Ozu as assistant director, was that a director could give disparate scenes continuity. Following the advice of other directors, I used to go and watch foreign films and, red pen in hand, I would jot down on the script all the technical details of what I saw on the screen. But by doing this, I learned only about the style of the individual directors whose work I studied. To catch the inner life in a certain director's films, you are better off watching their film with your arms crossed! The red pen method did not teach me anything fundamental.

Trendy ways of shooting films with rare, bizarre angles rapidly date. For that reason, such methods should be avoided. Besides, technical prowess is of secondary importance for a director, and it develops naturally throughout his or her career, intuitively, spontaneously. I wanted to state my personal views on my work, and distinguish between the human and technical elements in filmmaking. Please excuse the non-systematic nature of this text.

Traditions and Influences

By Shohei Imamura

At the end of the Second World War, I was eighteen. It was then that Western culture invaded Japan and other threw our values. Personally, I was strongly attracted to these cultures, particularly to the American theatre, “*A Streetcar Named Desire*” by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, et cetera. These plays were presented by the CIE (the Information Ministry under the American army occupation administration).

Existentialism, which started to spread in Japan, also was an influence. At that time, we could not ignore these cultural movements, trendy or otherwise, which swept through our lives. However, as for my own films, I want them to be like myself: very Japanese.

In 1951, I was an assistant director and continued to be one for six years. I already knew then that I was going to be a creator (I mean by that a director). I purposely thought about the future and knew that I would have to suffer a lot to achieve my goals. I knew that, in order to develop and realize my own ideas, I had first to look at myself and the cultural influences, which formed me. I understood that my filmmaking would only be truly international if it was derived from a Japanese cultural and ideological struggle.

People often think that the more you go back in history the closer you get to your roots, but that’s not true. From the earliest times, foreign cultures influenced Japan to a greater or lesser degree. Indian culture, for instance, infiltrated Japan through China, and Chinese culture through Korea. Since the Pacific Ocean could not be navigated eastwards to the Americas, all these different cultures stopped short in Japan and contributed to a kind of fer-

ment, which in turn gave birth to the decadent beauty; a good example of this is the Edo culture, especially Kabuki.

For a long time now, I have thought about traditions in a very personal way. I am convinced, for example, that despite successive external influences, the basic human qualities of a society will never change. In, for instance, *The Insect Woman*, *Endless Desire* and *Intentions of Murder*, I look at things from the point of daily folklore. *Vengeance is Mine* is the only film that doesn’t follow this pattern.

I show true things using fictional techniques but maintaining truthfulness, that’s where my approach differs from Ozu. He wanted to make film more aesthetic. I want to make it more real. He aspired toward a cinematic nirvana. When I was his assistant, I was very opposed to him but now, whilst still not liking his films, I’m much more tolerant. As for me, I’d like to destroy this premise that cinema is fiction.

Some filmmakers, like Oshima for instance, will look at the evolution of cinema and try to decide which trend they belong to. Then they will choose their subject according to this decision. When I choose a subject, it is because I feel it, a bit like an animal. It is in my character. *A Man Vanishes* and *History of Postwar Japan* are essentially documentaries through which I tried to reveal some hidden truth about real life. That’s why I made them semi-fiction.

I work with actors in a very different way from Ozu. He instructs them on every detail: “Go forward three steps, take the phone and lean to the right 30 degrees, speak after three light breaths,” etc. I try to communicate more openly with them. I tell them the story of the film, we chat about everything and nothing. I still have to explain a minimum at the beginning of the shoot, but give them the freedom, as much as possible, to act as they wish.

Ozu’s method requires that the actor must understand his feelings and ap

proach. If they don't, he thinks they are bad actors. I don't have such blind faith in actors. I need to talk to them about family, education, etc. We talk of everyday life, of what they just did the night before. We continue this even on the bus taking us to the location, so much so that no one wants to sit next to me!

I have a preference for shooting true things. If my films are messy, it is probably due to the fact that I don't like too perfect a cinema. The audience must not admire the technical aspects of my filmmaking, like they would a computer or the law of physics.



IMAMURA: No Confucianist

By Audie Bock

In the bold artistic fecundity that was postwar Japanese cinema, the period we have called humanism, in the late Forties and Fifties, offered latent as well as overt commentary on the society of the day. There was a distinct tendency in the film aimed at a general audience to portray an idealized nuclear, or fairy-tale, family. Akira Kurosawa's hero and heroine in *No Regrets for Our Youth* come from two fiercely loyal nuclear families, though one is poor farmers and the other academic elite. Later the ideal of the nuclear family is still an underlying assumption even when one parent is missing, to add poignancy to the drama, as in Kurosawa's *Ikiru* or Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring*.

The postwar humanists, as influenced as they may have been by the proletarianism of Italian neorealism and the Communist ideologies coming to fore on the continent, showed a rice-eating, tatami-sitting family that all cared about each other's well-being as much as the Starrets of *Shane*. Even Kenji Mizoguchi in the early 1950s made such powerful "family values" films as *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954), in which the ancient Confucianist virtue of sisterly self-sacrifice for the sake of a brother's success is fully exploited. In his even more highly renowned *Ugetsu* (1953), the potter who drifts into a love affair with a seductive spirit is punished by the death of his wife, and reassured by her ghostly voice encouraging him in his solitary work at the end of the film. These are classical dramas in which the family unit appears whole at the beginning, is broken by some disastrous force, and is restored to its original emotional wholeness at the end.

The only major director who took the Confucianist tradition to task was

Mikio Naruse, who in such films as *Lightning* (1952) and *Floating Clouds* (1955) made it very clear that intervention in one's life by a family member may not always be in one's best interest: An old sister in *Lightning* tries to marry her youngest sister off to a vulgar but gifted entrepreneur in whom she herself is interested, and an uncle in *Floating Clouds* who once raped his niece comes back later in her life trying to exploit her in other ways. Keisuke Kinoshita also sometimes questioned Confucianist family values in the 1950s, but usually with a lighter tone, most notably in his two French-influenced comedies featuring the good-hearted stripper Carmen (1951 and 1952), whose rural family simply can't understand her crazy need to be urbane. Kinoshita, unlike Naruse, usually managed to skirt the harm family members do each other, except in his early maudlin melodrama of a single mother abandoned by her hipster kids in *A Japanese Tragedy* (1953). Even when the nuclear family and Confucianist values are questioned, however, it is always economic factors, or war, that are seen as the evil influence leading people astray. And with all the postwar humanists, the presentation of the story is in classical film storytelling mode, a Balzacian progression from the general scene to the particular characters and their actions, engaging close-ups, symphonic music, emotionally satisfying resolution, long shot and out.

Then came the Sixties. We always say that everything changed when Nagisa Oshima saw Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and Godard's *Breathless*. This was the supposed inception of the Japanese "Nouvelle Vague," a phenomenon reportedly confined to the Shochiku Ofuna Studios where Oshima, Masahiro Shinoda, and a young man named Shohei Imamura all worked. In retrospect, and in no way to diminish the greatness of these two French films, I think it is too much to say they were so entirely pivotal in the development of the cinema of another country, especially given the extreme differentiation the artistry of Oshima, Shinoda, and Imamura endured. Oshima is of course the best known in France, where several of his films were produced, and where one might say *Max Mon Amour* finished his career as a director of theatrical films. These three men, all of whom held degrees from presti-

gious universities, brought a new way of viewing their subject matter to their work. If Oshima took it upon himself to expose hypocrisy in everything from the Japanese Communist Party (*Night and Fog in Japan*, 1961) to the presentation of sexuality on the screen (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976), Shinoda delved into Japanese traditional drama and aesthetics (*Double Suicide*, 1969). And Imamura, opting for the superficial tone of a bon vivant, made movies about what he likes: pleasingly plump and sensuous women. Leaving the more overtly theoretical issues to the Oshimas and other political filmmakers, Imamura goes after everything outside of the Confucianist nuclear family. He laughs at it on one hand, and on the other he brings out the ongoing pain and humiliation, and often the need for revenge, in the most mundane of relationships: parents and children. The results are anthropological, politically feminist, and cast in a new filmic aesthetic.

In *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), for example, the overall environment is chaos. Yes, the opening shots set the scene, but with Toshiro Mayuzumi's jazz-rock score on the gaudy streets of Yokosuka in a leisurely stroll before the appearance of the gullible hero, Kinta (Hiroyuki Nagato), an almost Robert Altman, style in-joke. From this street scene the camera races us through the narrow alleyways, following Kinta and a sailor whose cap he has stolen, into the raucous, stifling atmosphere of a brothel so tight the girls perform in bunk beds. Arms, legs, navels and underwear intrude into the negotiation between Kinta and the sailor, and when a deal is cut, the whore and the sailor exit frame upwards. Gaping and gasping with laughter, we are immediately beguiled by the perfectly blended novelty of both presentation and subject matter.

The hero and heroine, Haruko (Jitsuko Yoshimura) both have parents: Kinta has a father who earns a living as a ragpicker, a profession he considers honest and upstanding, and which Kinta despises. Haruko has a mother who lives off the money coming in from Haruko's older sister, the mistress of an American. The mother is pressuring Haruko to take up a similar line of

work because she'd like a little more income besides wanting to have her daughter settled comfortably. No nuclear family here, and what does exist of family is hardly nurturing. Kinta's father has given up on him, and Haruko's mother keeps her own interests foremost. Gone is the pap of the larger-than-life hero, the long-suffering heroine, and of cathartic character development.

From the outset, Haruko is portrayed as a girl who knows what she wants out of life: she wants Kinta and a clean, untainted life, even if it means working in a factory in another city. Kinta also emerges fully developed: He wants Haruko and an easy life. Haruko tries several times to convince Kinta to give up the gang and lead a straight life with her, but he always has one more job to do for the gang. Far from the idealized gangsters of the yakuza film genre, these thugs are not only disloyal, but dyspeptic (Tetsuro Tamba's funniest role) and dumb. Nowhere in this array of sleazy caricatures is the Confucianist, the Chinese and Korean gangsters make fun of the Japanese as they too exploit the Americans, filial child or devoted parent, and nowhere is the postwar humanist with boy scout values of improving the lot of the poor, as in Kurosawa's films. Rather, a healthy cynicism about human nature, shall we say, with a good measure of humour.

One thing Imamura will not let us do is feel sorry for his characters. The raped and abused heroines of *The Insect Woman* and *Intentions of Murder*, for example, manage to turn their bad luck and womanhood to such advantage that we end up laughing both at and with them. Even in a film so bizarre as *Vengeance is Mine*, the story of a serial killer, our sympathies are intellectual, how and why did this man do this, and what was his life like, rather than emotional. This is the mark of Imamura the scientist, the anthropologist, who serves up his characters with all of their vulgarity and venality as well as their touching sensitivities and foibles. In *The Profound Desire of the Gods*, where the modern civilization represented by the Tokyo engineer (Kazuo Kitamura) is pitted against the indigenous Ryuku people and their pagan religion, neither side is all good or all bad, though the outcome of the confrontation is known in advance; just as the outcome of the

American Indian people pitted against the White Man is known. Imamura abounds in easy laughter, but there are no easy tears. Incest, rape and murder are problems that arise in most of the families Imamura portrays, and they are horrors to be taken in stride so that one can go on leading a healthy and robust life.

A glaring exception to the ribald rule of Imamura's chaotic style is *Black Rain*. I believe that this was a case of being overwhelmed by the original story, one that many a first-rate director before him had wanted to adapt for the screen, Naruse and Kurosawa among them. Moreover, the author of the original, Masuji Ibuse, was still alive to approve or disapprove. He did the latter, even though Imamura's adaptation is remarkably faithful in its portrait of a young woman whose future is tainted by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Uncharacteristically, this is a story in which tears may flow. Imamura shows much more restraint than a Tadashi Imai or a Kurosawa would have, but this most recent wide release seems to indicate the classic Japanese return to tradition in later life. This phenomenon has usually applied to writers such as Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata, who was so avant-garde as to write the screenplay for Teinosuke Kinugasa's *A Page of Madness* in 1928, but in his later years wrote stories against a background of tea ceremony and hot spring resorts. *Black Rain* remains a well-told story, no matter how somber and politically correct, but only a look at Imamura's forthcoming *The Eel (Unagi)* will reveal if the master of chaos and the un-Confucian family has changed his style for good.



IMAMURA SHOHEI

A Biography

By Nelson Kim

I am interested in the relationship of the lower part of the human body and the lower part of the social structure on which the reality of daily Japanese life obstinately supports itself.

The Japanese did not change as a result of the Pacific War—they haven't changed in thousands of years!

Yokohama, 1977. American film critic and translator Audie Bock is interviewing Shohei Imamura at the offices of Imamura's film school (which has since moved to Shin-Yurigaoka, just outside Tokyo). Imamura is speaking of the shrines dedicated to the fox god Inari that modern Japanese corporate bosses install on the rooftops of their modern corporate office towers: "You may think all that is real," he said, gesturing toward the dreary cityscape outside, "but to me it's all illusion. The reality is those little shrines, the superstition and the irrationality that pervades the Japanese consciousness under the veneer of the business suits and advanced technology."

In nineteen feature films over 45 years Imamura has probed the lower depths of Japanese society and "the Japanese consciousness". Not for him the tourist-friendly vision of Japan as the post-war economic powerhouse of Asia, the land of kimono-clad elegance, Zen serenity, and harmonious Confucian social hierarchies. Instead he has put onscreen a world populated by prostitutes, pimps, and petty thieves, peasant farmers and middle-class pornographers, serial killers and shamen. This is the irrepressibly "real" Japan of his

bawdy, ragged, sensual films.

Born in 1926, the third son of a physician, Imamura attended elite high schools where, he says, encounters with Japan's ruling-class children soured him on the sheltered minds of the privileged:

I despised them, and remember thinking that they were the kind of people who would never get close to the fundamental truths of life. Knowing them made me want to identify myself with working-class people who were true to their own human natures. At that age, though, I probably still thought of myself as being innately superior to working-class people.

Typical stuff for a middle-class youth of any time or place, perhaps, but post-war Japan was a more unsettled time and place than most. Imamura enrolled at Waseda University to study Western History, but by his account he neglected his schoolwork in favor of student theater and radical politics; during the immediate post-war years he hustled on the black market. He has described this period as a personally liberating one:

When the emperor came on the radio to announce our defeat, I was 18 years old. It was fantastic. Suddenly everything became free. We could talk about our real thoughts and feelings without hiding anything. Even sex became free, and the black market was brilliant.

I was strongly against the continuation of the imperial system, and had many discussions with my friends about Hirohito's responsibility for the war. But my greatest obsession was individual freedom, the condition that the state had denied us absolutely during the war years, and I became fascinated by existentialism. At the time I was making a living from the black market: I bought illicit liquor and cigarettes from soldiers of the American occupation forces and sold them to my professors. That was the only time in my whole life when I was well off, although I spent all I made on drink.

He associated with racketeers and thugs, and became friendly with prostitutes and bar hostesses. These latter marked his view of women for life:

They weren't educated and they were vulgar and lusty, but they were also strongly affectionate and they instinctively confronted all their own sufferings. I grew to admire them enormously.

Such women became the "vulgar and lusty" heroines of many of his films.

Soon after graduating from university in 1951, Imamura entered Shochiku's assistant director's program at its Ofuna studios (as did his contemporaries Nagisa Oshima and Masahiro Shinoda). He assisted Yasujiro Ozu ("I was basically just a clapper boy") on three films, including the classic *Tokyo Story*. Imamura was underwhelmed. Ozu's methods, especially his precise, regimented direction of actors, were not to his taste, which is unsurprising, since temperamentally no filmmaker could be farther from Ozu's quiet, measured acceptance of life. He preferred to work under Yuzo Kawashima, a director little known outside of Japan, whose interest in lower-class life appealed to the younger man. In later years Imamura would write a memoir paying tribute to his former mentor; he also cited Kawashima's rebellious attitude toward his studio bosses as an important precursor to the Japanese New Wave.

In 1954 Imamura transferred into the training program at Nikkatsu studios, because the newly reactivated company was aggressively recruiting young talent, and because he had begun dating the company administrator at Shochiku (they later married). Kawashima soon joined him at Nikkatsu, and the apprenticeship continued, with Imamura writing scripts and assistant-directing.

In the late 1950s he finally got his chance to move up the company ladder. 1958 saw the release of three movies directed by Shohei Imamura: *Stolen Desire*, *Nishi Ginza Station*, and *Endless Desire*, followed by *My Second Brother* in 1959. These were studio assignments, and have rarely been screened outside of Japan. In 1961 came *Pigs and Battleships*, generally acknowledged as the first distinctive Imamura film; a vivid satire, set against

the backdrop of the US military occupation, about a young, not-so-innocent couple involved in an illicit scheme to raise and sell pigs. Imamura's mature voice is heard clearly here, in the imagery that equates humans with animals (the Yankee soldiers are pigs, and so are the Japanese thugs chasing their money), in the heroine's quest for freedom, and in the release of pent-up energy at the end; the pigs escape during a gunfight, and stampede through the streets.

From *Pigs and Battleships* on Imamura gave onscreen life to the worldview he had been cultivating during his dues-paying years. He says that while writing scripts at Nikkatsu, he yearned to become a better storyteller, and thought perhaps his understanding of the world was lacking. So he began going to the library to test his own observations of people against the theories of sociologists, ethnographers and anthropologists. Presumably his reading of social science texts influenced the research-experiment quality that characterizes his mature cinematic style: even as the characters rush to and fro, caught up in their mad desires, the director observes them with a scientist's coolness. The *Insect Woman*'s original title translates as *Entomological Chronicles of Japan*, and the subtitle of *The Pornographers* is *Introduction to Anthropology*. The films often feel as if Imamura concocted the scenario, set his actors loose in the characters' environment, and then proceeded as a documentarian would, capturing the weird reality taking place before him. Scenes are usually filmed from wide- or medium-shot distance. There are infrequent close-ups and few POV shots. Editing is rarely used to expand or contract time in order to build excitement in the viewer. Even the films' most frenzied and violent moments play out as parts of an ongoing chronicle or examination of behavior, not as dramatic highlights to be manipulated by the director for maximum audience impact.

Throughout the 1960s Imamura continued to elaborate his vision. *The Insect Woman* begins with the camera tracing the progress of an insect crawling over the dirt as it attempts to climb a hill, falls back, re-gathers its strength and pushes forward, stumbles back again. That blind animal struggle is the

whole movie in miniature, the life story of the heroine, Tome (Sachiko Hidari). Tome is a rural peasant who moves to the city during wartime to work in a factory, where she becomes a union activist, then an unmarried mother, later a prostitute, and eventually a madam, before a series of reversals finds her working as a domestic servant in late middle age. Lovers leave her, employees betray her, her daughter deserts her, but she perseveres, like the insect at the beginning. Though the tale sounds melodramatic in outline, Imamura studiously denies us any prolonged emotional indulgence in Tome's turns of fortune, keeping us at a distance from her suffering, and pointing up her own pettiness and greed. *Intentions of Murder* is the story of Sadako (Masumi Harukawa), a country girl stuck in a bad marriage, who is raped by a burglar. Her initial reaction is to do what society expects: expunge the shame of her violation by committing suicide. But while preparing to kill herself, Sadako grows hungry and proceeds to dig into a hot meal; the food awakens a desire for more life. She develops an attachment to the rapist, a pathetic figure infatuated with her. They become lovers. In the end, the rapist is dead of tuberculosis and Sadako has grown strong, dominating the household which earlier dominated her.

Tome and Sadako are the first fully fleshed-out examples of the Imamura heroine: sometimes crude and inarticulate, often unprincipled and irrational, but possessing a sharp instinct for self-preservation and a great zest for life. Imamura's women are a different breed from the noble victims found in the usual "woman's film" of both East and West. He has said, "Self-sacrificing women like the heroines of Naruse's *Floating Clouds* and Mizoguchi's *Life of Oharu* don't really exist."

From *Pigs and Battleships* to *Warm Water Under a Red Bridge*, he presents women who are earthy and passionate, and every bit as cruel, wanton, and selfish as the men in their lives, weaklings, bounders, adolescents in adult bodies. Some critics have hailed him as a feminist for breaking with the stereotypes of an older generation and depicting women as sexual agents swimming against the current of a patriarchal culture, but neither he nor his

female characters are flying the flag for social change or gender solidarity. These women are simply out to survive in the world it was given to them to live in.

With *The Pornographers*, his first film made through his own independent production company, Imamura took a satirical look at male lust. *The Pornographers* is a black comedy about a maker of low-budget porno films and part-time procurer named Subuyan Ogata (Shoichi Ozawa). Subuyan lives with a widow and her two teenage children, a boy who crawls into his mother's bed for comfort and a girl for whom Subuyan harbors not-so-hidden desires; incest is a running theme in many of Imamura's films. Haru (Sumiko Sakamoto), the widow, believes her dead husband's soul lives on in a carp she keeps in a fish tank beside her bed, training its unblinking eyes on her "sinful" liaison with Subuyan. At film's end, Haru is dead, the make-shift family scattered. Crazed, impotent Subuyan resolves to leave behind the treacherous world of women. He spends years building a life-like sex doll in Haru's image, and the last shot finds him drifting out to sea in his houseboat, oblivious to everything except the perfect union he'll soon consummate with his ideal woman.

Imamura made his first detour into documentary filmmaking with *A Man Vanishes*, a highly original blend of documentary and fiction techniques, and a worthy precursor to Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf's later experiments. Imamura was interested in studying a Japanese social phenomenon: every year, many men disappear from the lives they've constructed, leaving behind jobs and families, vanishing into anonymity. *A Man Vanishes* follows Yoshie Hayakawa, the fiancée of one such man, as she tracks down leads, pokes into rumors, searches for the truth about her missing lover. Eventually she reveals that she has fallen in love with the "investigator" Imamura has paired her with, a professional actor (Shigeru Tsuyuguchi, the rapist in *Intentions of Murder*). In the film's central scene, Imamura, onscreen, provokes a confrontation in a teahouse between Hayakawa and her sister, who she believes played a part in her fiancé's disappearance, and then, at a mo-

ment of high tension, the director shouts a command to his hidden crew as the walls of the "teahouse" collapse to reveal a film set. "Real people" and actors, unmediated reality and staged scenes, the world and its soundstage imitation: in this sly, provocative, and puzzling film, Imamura muddies the boundaries and relishes the mess that results.

In 1968 came the epic *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (also known as *Kuragejima: Tales from a Southern Island*), set among a tribal community whose remote island is visited by an engineer on a scouting mission for a Tokyo construction company. The island's natives struggle to balance their attachment to tradition against their fascination with the technological and cultural wonders of modernity. For all its barbarism, the islanders' way of life represents the harmony and homogeneity of the Japanese past, a past that crumbles beneath the heedless industrializing energies of the present. The natives begin to hunt fish with dynamite, to sell their land to the corporation, to regard themselves as the primitives the mainlanders consider them to be. In the conflict between old and new, everybody loses something, and nobody wins. Factories and airports, tourism and Coca-Cola arrive on the island, shattering the centuries-old order of things, and the engineer learns too late to love what he helped destroy. *Profound Desire* is a grand summation of Imamura's themes and concerns: civilization versus savagery; science versus superstition; humans as animals; capitalism, paganism, and incest.

The film cost a great deal to make, and did not turn a profit. Meanwhile, Imamura's old employer Nikkatsu, which provided backing for his production company, was nearing collapse. Imamura retrenched, and re-emerged as a full-time documentary filmmaker; this was how he spent most of the 1970s. The documentaries, most of them made for television, maintain his earlier interest in Japanese society's outsiders, the rebels and dropouts of the nation's recent history: a bar hostess in the US military port town of Yokosuka; Japanese women sent to Southeast Asia in the pre-war years to serve as sex slaves for the Japanese military, who decided not to return

home once they had won their freedom; soldiers who fought overseas for the Emperor and similarly chose to remain living as expatriates.

During the late 1970s, Imamura began to move back to fictional filmmaking. There were economic reasons: during his years as a documentarian, his family was mainly supported by his wife's job as head of an animation company. But there was also a growing dissatisfaction with the nature of the work he was doing:

I... found myself wondering whether documentary was really the best way to approach these matters. I came to realize the presence of the camera could materially change people's lives. Did I have the right to effect such changes? Was I playing God in trying to control the lives of others? I'm no sentimental humanist, but thoughts like these scared me and made me acutely aware of the limitations of documentary filmmaking.

And finally, he simply felt like going back to making up stories with actors: "[T]here were many things I wanted to express that were beyond the reach of a documentary." Whatever the reason, he returned to fiction fully reenergized in the late '70s and '80s, with a series of films that built upon and arguably surpassed his '60s work.

First came *Vengeance Is Mine*, starring Ken Ogata as Iwao Enokizu, a character based on a real-life figure whose 78-day crime spree in 1963 captivated the nation. The story is related in an elaborate flashback structure, jumping from Enokizu's capture to the manhunt that preceded it, back to his youth, then forward to his series of bloody killings, and forward again to the years after his execution by the state. As we chart Enokizu's descent from theft and fraud to murder, we're introduced to the unlucky souls drawn into his orbit: his despised father, a devout Christian; his deserted wife (she and her father-in-law share a strong mutual attraction but religion and decorum prevent their acting upon it); the fatalistic woman who falls in love with him during his last weeks on the run and becomes his final victim. Near the end Imamura borrows from *Citizen Kane* and *Psycho* when he supplies a

pocket-sized psychoanalytic explanation for Enokizu's will to kill (issues with Dad), but this provides little illumination and less comfort. Anchored by Ogata's mesmerizing performance, *Vengeance Is Mine* is one of the director's great works, a true-crime thriller that expands in the mind to become a frightening portrait of unappeasable evil.

The film was a critical and commercial success, allowing Imamura to raise a sizable budget to make *Eijanaika*, loosely translated as "Why not?" or "What the hell?", his first period piece, an historical epic set in 1860s Edo (present-day Tokyo), soon after Japan opened its doors to the West following centuries of isolation. Genji (Shigeru Izuyima), a peasant farmer, was rescued from a shipwreck by an American boat crew; now, after several years in the US, he has returned to Japan. He seeks to reclaim the hand of his wife Ine (Kaori Momoi), who believes him to be dead; she is now a performer in a carnival sideshow and the mistress of the carnival boss Kinzo (Shigeru Tsuyuguchi). Kinzo's connections to the underworld and to various political players precipitate Genji and Ine's involvement in the power struggle between the reigning Shogun clans and those seeking to restore the Emperor's rule. The bulk of this lengthy film details the machinations of the two factions, as Kinzo plays off one side against the other and Genji tries to persuade Ine to return with him to the USA. The film climaxes with an extraordinary explosion of energy, as Edo's lower classes ("heedless, unmindful, frivolous, and strong" in the words of the introductory caption), feeding off of the turbulence and uncertainty swirling around them, erupt in a spontaneous revolt against the Shogunate's rule, rioting, singing, dancing, donning makeup and costumes, stripping naked and pissing in the streets. The sequence is like Eisenstein on LSD: the crowd seems to move as one, then splinter into a chaotic sprawl of thousands of crazed individuals, only to form a mass once more and press forward, chanting joyously: "Eijanaika!" Rarely has the widescreen format been used to such potent effect. The spectacular display of color, movement, bodies rushing every which way, is exhilarating. The forces of authority put down the revolt with guns, and the film closes on an elegiac note, but the orgiastic frenzy of the riots will not be

forgotten. No scene in Imamura's work better sums up his vision of the amoral, apolitical, anarchic life-force that pulses beneath the seeming stability of the social order.

Another historical film followed in 1983: *The Ballad of Narayama*, based on the novel by Shichiro Fukazawa and previously filmed by Keisuke Kinoshita in 1958. The film is set in a small, isolated mountain village in northern Japan in the late 1800s. The story begins in the winter of Orin's 69th year. Orin (Sumiko Sakamoto) is a family matriarch facing the law of the land: tribal custom demands that when villagers turn 70, they must be taken up Mount Narayama by their offspring, to die. Death equals life: in this harsh mountain world, the old must die to ensure there will be enough food for the young to survive. Death equals life, and sex equals death: each act of sex is a potential childbirth, and each childbirth brings a family closer to starvation. But death, again, equals life: an unwanted newborn is left outside to perish, but its corpse, rotting in the dirt, will fertilize the tough soil and provide more food for the living. There is no room for the sentimental idea of the world as a staging-ground for the human drama. The wolf is always at the door. Nature is present in nearly every shot; plants, animals, earth crowd the frame, indifferent to the human struggle. The rhythm of the film is the rhythm of nature, the turn of the seasons. A young couple fucks on the grass; while nearby, a pair of snakes mirrors their actions, frogs rest on a lily pad, birds nest in a tree. Birds do it, bees do it, Imamura's Japanese do it. As Orin's 70th winter approaches, her eldest son Tatsuhei (Ken Ogata) prepares to fulfil his duty. At the film's climax, a nearly wordless half-hour-long sequence, Tatsuhei carries his mother up the mountain. As they ascend, we witness a heart-stopping image: hundreds of skeletons, the bones of dead ancestors from generations past. At the moment of goodbye, Tatsuhei refuses to leave. Orin slaps him across the face, and sends him on his way. The first snow of winter falls. The cycle turns: Tatsuhei knows that not too many winters from now, he'll join his mother on Narayama. The movie is wholly characteristic of Imamura in its ribaldry, its celebration of sex and survival, and its unsentimental view of nature, human and non-human, but

this final sequence brings a new kind of shock. *The Ballad of Narayama* is Imamura's masterpiece.

Zegen, also known as *The Pimp or A Pander*, was based on the autobiography of Iheji Muraoka (played by Ogata), a Japanese expatriate who ran a string of brothels in Southeast Asia during the imperial-expansion years of the early twentieth century. The film was never distributed in the USA. Then Imamura adapted *Black Rain* from the novel by Masuji Ibuse. Yasuko (Yoshiko Tanaka) is a young woman living with her aunt Shigeko and uncle Shigematsu in Hiroshima when the Americans drop the atom bomb. These early scenes are stark, direct, hard to watch and difficult to forget. Imamura makes us see the flesh as it melts and drips off a man's bones, the tiny charred corpse clutched by a mother. The family lives through the post-war years, waiting to see if the dreaded radiation sickness affecting so many survivors will claim them too. In the meantime, they try to get on with their lives, Shigematsu wants to see Yasuko married off; she wants to remain with them. Eventually, they all grow ill. That's it. Somber, stately, and slowly paced, *Black Rain* was viewed by some critics as Imamura's submission to classical rigor in his old age, even as his "reconciliation" with Ozu. The domestic-melodrama aspects of the story, which also recall Ozu, are well handled; this is one of the few Imamura films that are effective as a tearjerker. The brisk, kinetic editing of the earlier works has given way to a style of long unbroken takes captured from a chaste distance. But though the tone is subdued, the film carries a current of political anger at the suffering caused by the bomb, and a powerful sense of the devastation engendered by the war. Interestingly, the film was faulted by critics in other Asian countries for depicting only the Japanese as the war's victims.

Another hiatus followed, during which Imamura suffered a stroke, and had trouble raising money for his next project, *Dr. Akagi*. But in 1997 he inaugurated a new period of creativity with *The Eel*, a mellow comedy about a businessman (Koji Yakusho, the popular star of *Shall We Dance* and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cure*) who is sent to jail for killing his adulterous wife. Re-

leased from prison after eight years, he attempts to build a quiet life amidst a clamorous community of misfits and do-gooders, a pursuit further complicated by the romantic attentions of a woman he rescues from a botched suicide. Some found the film a tentative and even tepid work, but many greeted it as a return to form: it shared the Palme d'Or at Cannes with Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (Imamura had won the prize earlier, for *The Ballad of Narayama*), and its international success allowed Imamura to make two more films in succession: *Dr. Akagi* in 1998 and *Warm Water under a Red Bridge*.

Dr. Akagi is an energetically rendered portrait of Japan in the last year of World War Two. Japan's defeat is imminent. Akagi (Akira Emoto), a family doctor, tries to help his patients and pursue his medical research as the world falls apart around him; Imamura may be working partly from memory here: his father was a doctor, and he was a young man during this period. Akagi is a weird and original creation, part heroic crusader, part buffoon. Selfless in his devotion to medicine and healing, he may also be losing his mind. He diagnoses every one of his patients with hepatitis, and is convinced, against all evidence that Japan will triumph over its enemies. The war, in fact, may have driven him mad but, this being an Imamura film, it's difficult to say. Hard times have pressed everyone to their limits. Families sell their daughters into prostitution, sons die at the front, and doctors become drug addicts. Yet despite the bleakness of its setting, the film is an ebullient entertainment, the director amused as ever with the freaks and dreamers he puts on parade.

Warm Water stars Koji Yakusho as Sasano, a downsized "salary man" facing a divorce. He travels to the seaside Toyama prefecture in search of rumored buried treasure, and becomes involved with Saeko (Misa Shimizu), a local woman with a unique biological quirk: when she orgasms, she unleashes a tide of warm fluid that soaks the floors, runs out of the house, and spills into the nearby river, drawing the fish toward it and delighting the local fishermen. Sasano searches for the treasure as his strange romance

takes flight. Saeko's gushing at first excites but soon disturbs the conventional-minded Sasano, and he begins to withdraw. At the end, he discovers that the "treasure" he had sought was a metaphor, for a woman's love and lust. Here Imamura the aged libertine is in Lawrencian seize-the-day mode, satirizing the timidity of the corporate-technocrat generation. Taro, the recently deceased used-book seller whose spirit presides over the film, he's the one who sends Sasano on the treasure quest, tells the younger man in a flashback, "Enjoy life while you can still get a hard-on," and Imamura admits Taro speaks for him: "His message is my own... I think we've lost our way. We've got this wonderful freedom and nobody is doing anything with it."

All three of the recent features handle audacious shifts in tone with terrific fluency. *The Eel* begins as a bloody thriller, turns into a drama of redemption, and finally becomes a knockabout comedy with surrealist touches. They also share an interest in utilizing acting ensembles to create an onscreen community of misfits and outcasts: Imamura's people, then and now. In time, the late works may grow in stature, though they lack the tension of an artist discovering new things to say, or, as in late Buñuel, the excitement of an artist finding new ways to say old things. But they constitute an impressive last act in a major career, and certainly live up to Imamura's old declaration: "I want to make messy, really human, Japanese, unsettling films."

I've always wanted to ask questions about the Japanese, because it's the only people I'm qualified to describe... I am surprised by my reception in the west. I don't really think that people there can possibly understand what I'm talking about.

SHOHEI IMAMURA

A Complete Filmography

Nusumareta Yokujo, Stolen Desire (1958):

Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Kazu Otsuka, Original Story: Toko Kon, Screenplay: Toshiro Suzuki, Cinematography: Kurataro Takamura, Editing: Tadashi Nakamura, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Osamu Takizawa as Taminosuke Yamamura, Shinichi Yanagisawa as Ezaburo Yamamura, Hiroyuki Nagato as Shinichi Kunida, Kô Nishimura as Kanji Takada, Hayao Takamura as Eisuke Kato, Shojiro Ogasawara as Tominachiro Kobayashi, Rusei Ito as Senta, Nobuo Kawakami as Policeman, Michie Kita as Chigusa Yamamura, Yôko Minamida as Chidori Yamamura, Kimiko Nanazato as Sayoko, Shoichi Ozawa as Toshiro, Ryoko Sakai as Kazuko, Aomi Shiba as Reiko, Kin Sugai as Osen Yamamura, Toyoko Takechi as Osan, Masako Urushizawa as Midori, Jun Yamanobe as Owner of the brick shop, Miyoko Yokoyama as Otome.

Nishi Ginza Ekimae, Nishi Ginza Station (a.k.a. Lights of Night, 1958):

Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Mogi Ryouji, Original Idea and screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Cinematography: Hisanobu Fujioka, Art Direction: Kimihiko Nakamura, Lighting: Tsurumori Toshio, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Frank Nagai, Shinichi Yanagisawa, Ko Nishimiura, Shoichi Ozawa, Kyoko Hori, Masahiko Shimazu, Hisano Yamaoka, Keiko Yamane, Hatsui Kotoe.

Endless Desire, Hateshinaki Yokubo, Endless Desire (1958): Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Kazu Otsuka, Original Story: Fujiwara Shinji, Screenplay: Toshiro Suzuki, Shohei Imamura, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Editing: Mutsuo Tanji, Art Director: Kimihiko Nakamura, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi.

Cast: Hiroyuki Nagato, Sanea Nakahara, Ko Nishimura, Taiji Tonoyama, Misako Watanabe, Shouichi Ozawa, Takeshi Katou, Ichiro Sugai, Taiji Tonoyama, Shinichi Yanagisawa.

Nianchan, My Second Brother (1959):

Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Seiou Sakagami, Original Story: Sueko Yasumoto, Screenplay: Ichiro Ikeda, Shohei Imamura, Cinematography:

Shinsaku Himeda, Editing: Mutsuo Tanji, Art Direction: Kimihiko Nakamura, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Hiroyuki Nagato as Kiichi Yasumoto, eldest brother, Kayo Matsuo as Yoshiko, eldest sister, Takeshi Nakamura as Koichi, Nianchan, Akiko Maeda as Sueko, younger sister, Kô Nishimura as Goro Mitamura, Yoshio Omori as Seki, Taiji Tonoyama as Hemmi Gengoro, Shinsuke Ashida as Sakai, Tanie Kitabayashi, Kasuko Yoshiyuki, Hideaki Nitani, Shitanie Kitabaya, Shouichi Ozawa.

Buta to Gunkan, Pigs and Battleships (a.k.a. The Flesh Is Hot, 1961):

Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Kazu Otsuka, Original screenplay: Hisashi Yamanouchi, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Editing: Mutsuo Tanji, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi, Art Direction: Kimihiko Nakamura

Cast: Jitsuko Yoshimura as Haruko, Yôko Minamida as Katsuyo, Takeshi Katô, Masao Mishima, Hiroyuki Nagato as Kinta, Sanae Nakahara, Kô Nishimura, Shirô Osaka, Shoichi Ozawa as Gangster in Check Shirt, Kin Sugai as Haruko's mother, Tetsuro Tamba as Slasher Tetsuji, Akira Yamauchi, Shiro Osaka, Taiji Tonoyama

Nippon konchuki, The Insect Woman (a.k.a. Entomological Chronicles of Japan, 1963):

Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producers: Kazu Otsuka, Jirou Tomoda, Original Screenplay: Keiji Hasebe, Shohei Imamura, Editing: Mutsuo Tanji, Assistant Director: Tadahiko Isomi, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Production Manager: Masanori Yamanoi, Art Direction: Kimihiko Nakamura, Audio Recording: Tsuneo Furuyama, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Emiko Aizawa as Rui, Masumi Harukawa as Midori, Sachiko Hidari as Tome Matsuki, Emiko Higashi as Kane, Daizaburo Hirata as Kamibayashi, Seizaburô Kawazu as Karasawa, Teruko Kishi as Rin, Shitanie Kitabayashi as Madam, Kazuo Kitamura as Chuji, Asao Koike, as Sawakichi, Shoichi Kuwayama as Owagawa En's Lover, Hiroyuki Nagato as Matsunami, Shoichi Ozawa as Ken, Sumie Sasaki as En, Taiji Tonoyama as Foreman, Shigeru Tsuyuguchi as Honda, Jitsuko Yoshimura as Nobuko, Hyouei Enoki, Setsuko Watanabe.

Akai Satsui, Intentions of Murder (a.k.a. Unholy Desire, 1964):

Production Company: Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Masayuki Takagi, Original Story: Shinji Fukiwara, Screenplay: Keiji Hasebe and Shohei Imamura, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Editing: Mutsuo Tanji, Art Direction: Kimihiko Nakamura, Sound Recordist: Koshiro Jinbo, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Masumi Harukawa as Sadako Takahashi, Kô Nishimura as Koichi Takahashi, Shigeru Tsuyuguchi as Hiraoko, Yûko Kusunoki as Yoshiko Masuda, Ranko Akagi as Tadae Takahashi, Haruo Itoga as Yasuo Tamura
Yoshi Kato as Seizo Takahashi, Shitanie Kitabayashi as Kinu Takahashi, Kazuo Kitamura as Seiichiro Takahashi, Seiji Miyaguchi as Genji Miyata, Shoichi Ozawa as Kazuyuki Tamaru, Taiji Tonoyama as Musician, Yasuo Itoga, Hiroshi Kondou, Fumie Kitahara, Junichi Yamanobe.

Erogotshi Yori, The Pornographers (1966): Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Nikkatsu Corporation, Producer: Jiro Romado, Shohei Imamura, Issei Yamamoto, Original Story: Akiyuki Nosaka, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Koji Numata, Assistant Directors: Tadahiko Isomi, Yshiteru Yuki, Editing: Matsuo Tanji, Noboro Tanaka, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Toshiro Kusunoki, Art Direction: Hiromi Shiozawa, Ichiro Takada, Sound Department: Kenichi Benitani, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Shoichi Ozawa as Yoshimoto 'Subu' Ogata, Sumiko Sakamoto as Haru Masuda, Masaomi Kondo as Koichi Matsuda, Haru's Son, Keiko Sagawa as Keiko Matsuda, Haru's Daughter, Ganjiro Nakamura as Elderly Executive from Hakucho Company, Chocho Miyako as The virgin house Madame, Haruo Tanaka as Banteki, Shinichi Nakano as Kabo, Kô Nishimura as Detective Sanada, Ichirô Sugai as Shinun Ogata, Subuyan's Father, Taiji Tonoyama, Kin Sugai, Gajirou Satou, Takeshi Kato, Kazuo Kitamura as the Doctor

Ningen Johatsu, A Man Vanishes (1967):
Production Companies: Imamura Production, Nihio Eiga Shinsha, Art Theatre Guild of Japan, Producer: Shohei Imamura, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Kiriro Urayama, Editing: Matsuo Tanji, Assistant Director: Kiriro Urayama, cinematography: Kenji Ishiguro, Set Design: Ichiro Takada, Sound Recording: Kenichi Benitani, Kunio Takeshige, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Yoshie Hayakawa, Shigeru Tsuyuguchi, Sayo Hayakawa, Shohei Imamura

Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo, The Profound Desires of the Gods (a.k.a. Kuragejima – Tales from a Southern Island, 1968):
Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Nikkatsu Corporation, Producers: Yamanoi Masanori, Kazuhiko Hasegawa, Hiroshi Takano, Toshiya Yamashita, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Keiji Hasebe, Editing: Matsuo Tanji, Assistant Editor: Atsumi Nakahara, Assistant Directors: Kazuhiko Hasegawa, Kunio Takeshige, Kouji Okamoto, Cinematography: Masao Toshizawa, Assistant Cameramen: Seiki Mizuno,

Yasuyuki Okamoto, Shigeru Kawamoto, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Lighting Assistants: Sadahiro Kimura, Katsuro Morishita, Shigeru Yamada, Akira Ito, Production Design: Takeshi Omura, Makeup Artist: Shigeru Takagi, Choreography: Yukio Sekiya, Titles: Ushino Kamo, Sound Recordist: Senichi Benitani, Recording Assistants: Shouji Suzuki, Minoru Nobuoka, Yoshihiro Igaki, Music: Toshiro Mayuzumi

Cast: Rentaro Mikuni as Nekichi Futori, the chained son, Choichiro Kawarazaki as Kametaro Futori, Kazuo Kitamura as Engineer Kariya, Hideko Okiyama as Toriko Futori, Yoshi Kato as Ritsugen Ryu, Yasuko Matsui as Uma Futori, Kanjuro Arashi as Yamamori Futori, Jun Hamamura, Izumi Hara as Unari Ryu, Chikako Hosokawa, Hosei Komatsu, Chikage Ogi, Taiji Tonoyama, Tatsu Nakamura, Kazuhiko Hasegawa as Night Prowling Village Youth, Kiyoshi Tokugawa, Yasuhiko Isizu, Shin Mizushima.

Madamu onboro no Seikatsu, History Of Post War Japan As Told By A Bar Hostess (1970): Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Toho Co Ltd., Producers: Nobuya Horiba, Moto Ogasawara, Screenplay, interviewing: Shohei Imamura, Assisstant Director: Kazuhiko Hasegawa, Cinematography: Masao Tochizawa, Music: Harumi Ibe

Cast: Emiko Akaza, Etsuko Akaza, Akemi Akaza, Chieko Akaza, Fukumi Kuroda

Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute (1975):
Production Companies: Imamura Production, Shibata Organization, Planning: Shohei Imamura, Cinematography: Masao Toshizawa

Fukushu Suruwa Wareniari, Vengeance is Mine (1979):
Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Shochiku Films, Producer: Kazuo Inoue, Based on Novel by: Ryuzo Saki, Written: Masaru Baba, Assistant Director: Taku Shinjo, Editing: Keiichi Uraoka, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Production Design: Teruyoshi Satani, Sound Department: Shoutaro Yoshida, Original Music: Shinichiro Ikebe.

Cast: Ken Ogata as Iwao Enokizu, Mayumi Ogawa as Haru Asano, Rentaro Mikuni as Shizuo Enokizu, Mitsuko Baisho as Kazuko Enokizu, Nijiko Kiyokawa as Hisano Asano, Chocho Miyako as Kayo Enokizu, Moeko Ezawa as Chiyoko Hatake, Torahiko Hamada as Captain Yoshino, Shohei Hino as Junichiro Yoshitake, Yoshi Kato as Kyohei Kawashima, Choichiro Kawarazaki as Shop owner, Kazuo Kitamura as Shigemi Ideike, Toshie Negishi as Keiko Oka, Frankie Sakai as Captain Kawai, Kazuko Shirakawa as Sachiko Yoshizato, Goro Tarumi as Daihachi Baba, Taiji Tonoyama as Tanejiro Shibata, Sakae Umezu as Police

Eijanaika, Why Not? (1981):

Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Shochiku Films, Producers: Shouichi Ozawa, Jirou Tomoda, Shigemitsu Sugisaki, Original Story: Shohei Imamura, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Ken Miyamoto, Background Research: Yoshikazu Hayashi, Editing: Keiichi Uraoka, Assistant Director: Hideo Minamibe, Production Management: Nobutsugo Tsubomi, Hiromitsu Ooka, Production Assistant: Hiroyuki Chuujou, Cinematography: Shinsaku Himeda, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Art Direction: Teruyoshi Satani, Choreography: Kouyuu Sekiya, Sound Recordist: Shoutaro Yoshida, Music: Shinichiro Ikebe.

Cast: Kaori Momoi as Ine, Shigeru Izumiya as Genji, Ken Ogata as Furukawa, Shigeru Tsuyuguchi as Kinzo, Masao Kusakari as Itoman, Ako as Oyoshi, Mitsuko Baisho as Oko, Junzaburo Ban as Toramatsu, Shohei Hino as Magoshichi, Shino Ikenami as Yoshino, Etsuko Ikuta as Nui, Hiroshi Inuzuka as Roku, Choichiro Kawarazaki as Nakazawa, Kazuo Kitamura as Koide, Nenji Kobayashi as Matakichi, Yasuaki Kurata as Hanjiro, Norihei Miki as Masuya, Shoichi Ozawa as Sakunojo, Sanshō Shinsui as Densuke, Kazuko Shirakawa as Yamikumo-dayu, Yūko Tanaka as Omatsu, Kibaji Tankobo as Gon, Minoru Terada as Ijuin, Taiji Tonoyama as Jyosyuya, Jiro Yabuki as Senmatsu, Kenji Kasai, Youhei Kouno, Hiroko Tanaka.

Narayama Bushiko, Ballad Of Narayama (1983):

Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Toei Co Ltd., Producers: Goro Kusakabe, Jiro Tomoda, Based on the Novel by: Shichiro Fukazawa, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Editing: Hajime Okayasu, Assistant Director: Kunio Takeshige, Shunsaku Ikehata, Cinematography: Masao Toshizawa, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Art Direction: Tadataka Yoshino, Production Management: Kanji Aoi, Nobutsugo Tsubomi, line Producer: Shinji Komiya, Set Decoration: Hisao Inagaki, Costume Design: Kyoto Isho, Make up artist: Seiko Igawa, Sound Department: Kenichi Benitani, Music: Shinichiro Ikebe, Title Designer: Hideo Suzuki, Hawk Trainer: Uichiro Takeda

Cast: Ken Ogata as Tatsuhei, Sumiko Sakamoto as Orin, Tatsuhei's mother, Takejo Aki as Tamayan, Tatsuhei's wife, Tonpei Hidari as Tatsuhei's brother, Seiji Kurasaki as Kesakichi, older son, Kaoru Shimamori as Tomekichi, younger son, Ryutarō Tatsumi as Matayan, the old neighbor, Junko Takada as Matsu, Nijiko Kiyokawa as Okane, Mitsuko Baisho as Oei, Shoichi Ozawa as Katsuzo, Sanshō Shinsui as Tadayan, Norihei Miki as Old salt dealer, Akio Yokoyama as Amaya, Sachie Shimura as Amaya's wife, Masami Okamoto as Amaya's son, Fujio Tsuneda as Jisaku, Taiji Tonoyama as Teruyan, Casey Takamine as Arayashiki, Fujio Tokita as Jinsaku, Tsutomu Miura, Nenji Kobayashi, Yukie Shimura, Kan Eto, Fusako Iwasaki, Hideo Hasegawa, Kenji Murase, Sayuka Nakamura, Azumi Tanba, Kosei Sato, Ben Hiura.

Zegen (1987):

Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Toei Co Ltd., Producers: Yoshihiko Sugiyama, Kunio Takeshige, Jirou Ooba, Based on the Biography by: Iheiji Muraoka, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Kota Okabe, Editing: Hajime Okayasu, Assistant Director: Takashi Miike, Cinematography: Masao Toshizawa, Lighting: Iwaki Yasuo, Art Direction: Yoshinaga Yokoo, Sound Department: Kenichi Benitani, Music: Shinichiro Ikebe

Cast: Mitsuko Baisho as Shiho, Bang-ho Cho as Komashitai, Yuki Furutachi, Shino Ikenami as Tome, Kozo Ishii as Kumai, Kurenai Kanda as Otsuno, Choichiro Kawarazaki as Kunikura, Chun Hsiang Ko as Wang (as Chun-Hsiung Ko), Hiroyuki Konishi as Uehara, Mami Kumagaya as Kino, Leonard Kuma as Shop owner, Norihei Miki as Asanaga, Ken Ogata as Iheiji Muraoka, Sanshō Shinsui as Chota, Tetta Sugimoto as Genkichi, Minoru Terada as Hisamitsu, Taiji Tonoyama as Shimada, Fujio Tsuneta as Nishiyama, Kimiko Yoshimiya as Takeyo, Maiko Kazama.

Kuroi Ame, Black Rain (1989):

Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Hayashibura Group, Tokoku shinsha Film Company Ltd., Executive Producer: Shohei Imamura, Producer: Hisao Iino, Based on Novel by : Masuji Ibuse, Screenplay: Toshiro Ishido, Shohei Imamura, Edting: Hajime Okayasu, Assistant Directors: Nobuake Ito, Takashi Miike, Takashi Tsukinoki, Cinematography: Takashi Kawamata, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Camera Operators: Masachi Chikamori, Masakazu Oka, Junichi Watanabe, Art Direction: Takashi Inagaki, Production Manager: Kanhide Hirasu, Production Supervisor: Yasushi Matsuda, Set Decoration: Akira Kanda, Special Effects: Masatoshi Saito, Special Makeup Effects Artist: Isao Harayuma, Makeup Artist: Shigeiko Ikawa, Title Calligrapher: Hirohide Watanabe, Sound Recordist: Kenichi Benitani, Music: Toru Takemitsu, Dialect Coach: Shigeiko Ohara

Cast: Yoshiko Tanaka as Yasuko, Kazuo Kitamura as Shigematsu Shizuma, Etsuko Ichihara as Shigeiko Shizuma, Shoichi Ozawa as Shokichi, Norihei Miki as Kotaro, Keisuke Ishida as Yuichi, Hisako Hara as Kin, Masato Yamada as Tatsu, Tamaki Sawa as Woman in Ikemoto-ya, Akiji Kobayashi as Katayama, Kazuko Shirakawa as Old Woman with white flag, Kenjiro Ishimaru as Aono, Mayumi Tateichi as Fumiko of Ikemoto-ya, Taiji Tonoyama as The Old Priest, Fujio Tsuneda as 40 Year Old Woman with burns, Toshie Kusunoki as Kane, Reiko Nanao as Rui, Satoshi Iinuma as Takamaru, Toshiko Miki as Factory Foreman Fujita, Yohachi Fuji as Cab Driver, Sabu Kawahara as Kanemaru, Mitsunori Fukamizu as Nojima, Noboru Mitani as Post Office Clerk, Hideji Otaki as Dr. Fujita, Isayoshi Yamazaki as Young Yakuza, Mari Kamei as Nurse, Tatsuya Irie as Young Man, Kazue Minami as 1st Village Woman, Takaomi

Miura as Boy, Hiromi Yasui as 2nd Village Woman, Toru Iwasaka as Nojima's Stepfather, Nobuko Tani as Nojima's Stepmother, Shinichi Hibino as Dr. Ando, Tessui Tada as Buddhist Monk, Toshiko Yokota as Woman Throwing Roof Tiles, Yoshiro Hori as Wood Seller, Hitomi Ishihara as Woman of Nojima's Family, Junko Hori as Woman of Nojima's Family, Tetsuhiko Miyoshi as Takeo Takemaru, Kazuko Kawakami as Takamura's Second Wife, Junko Takahashi as Woman at Station, Sanshou Shinsui, Takashi Miike as Factory Worker.

Unagi, The Eel (1997):

Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Shochiku Films, Eisei Gekijo, Executive Producer: Kazuyoshi Okuyama, Producer: Hiso Iino, Planning: Yoshihisa Nakagawa, Kazuo Suzuki, Akira Narusawa, Based on the Novel ("Yami Ni Hirameku") by: Akira Yoshimura, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Motofumi Tomikawa, Daisuke Tengan, Editing: Hajime Okayasu, 1st Assistant Director: Fumio Inoue, 2nd Assistant Director: Masahide Kuwahara, 3rd Assistant Director: Hiroharu Kobayashi, Assistant Director: Takeshi Kubota, Script Supervisor: Hideko Nakata, Cinematography: Shigeru Komatsubara, Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki, Production Design: Hisao Inagaki, Production Coordinator: Nobuyuki Kajikawa, Line Producer: Yasushi Matsuda, Set Decorators: Toshiharu Aida, Yoshio Yamada, Wardrobe: Kazuo Matsuda, Hair: Shigeko Igawa, Choreographer: Hirofumi Nakase, Choreographer (flamenco): Kyoko Iwasaki, Sound Recordist: Kenichi Benitani, Koshiro Jimbo, Sound Effects Editor: Masatoshi Saito, Music: Shinichiro Ikebe, Music Performer: Tokyo Concerts, Music Performer (flamenco guitar): Norihori Takahashi, Main Title Design: Yokoza Akamatsu

Cast: Koji Yakusho as Takuro Yamashita, Misa Shimizu as Keiko Hattori, Fujio Tsuneta as Jiro Nakajima, Mitsuko Baisho as Nakajima's Wife, Misako Nakajima, Makoto Sato Jukichi as Takada—Carpenter, Akira Emoto Tamotsu as Takasaki, Ex-Convict, Sho Aikawa as Yuji Nozawa, Yakuza, Ken Kobayashi as Masaki Saito, UFO Freak, Sabu Kawara as Seitaro Misato, Cop, Etsuko Ichihara as Fumie Hattori, Keiko's Mother, Tomorrowo Taguchi as Eji Dojima, Sansho Shinsui Hospito Doctor, Shoichi Ozawa as Gynaecology Clinic Doctor, Chiho Terada as Emiko Yamashita, Koichi Ueda as Keiji, Detective, Hiroyuki Konishi as Prison Guard, Aramasa Nakamaru, Shigeru Hiraizumi, Seiji Kurasaki, Toshio Ishido, Ken Mitshishi as Detective, Kazuyuki Senba, Takashi Odajima, Masayuki Akinaga, Masahiro Noguchi, Kyoya Ogawa, Rumi Shiina, Sayuri Jindagawa, Yohihiro Zaitsu, Kalen Kurino, Kyohei Hayakawa, Makoto Yamamoto, Yasuharu Okubo, Kazuya Sasaki, Saburo Masamura, Kaoru Ikeda, Yasushi Kitamura, Jiko Uchiyama, Kentaro Sakai, Hiroko Miyazaki, Hisaya Nosaka, Ikiko Ihara, Miyuki Miura, Bansho Shinra, Toshishige Omori, Fujio Tokita.

Kanzo Sensei, Dr. Akagi (1998):

Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Co. Ltd., Toei Co. Ltd, Tohokashinsha Film Company Ltd., Producers: Hiso Ino, Koji Matsuda, Based on the Novel „Doctor Liver“ by: Ango Sakaguchi, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Daisuke Tengan, Editing: Hajime Okayasu, Assistant Director: Masahide Kuwabara, Continuity: Hideko Nakada, Cinematography: Shigeru Komatsubara, Lighting: Hideaki Yamakawa, Underwater Cinematography: Atsushi Takeda, Tomoji Tanaka, Akira Yamamoto, Gaffer: Hideaki Yamakawa, Production Design: Hisao Inagaki, Costume Design: Keisuke Chiyoda, Ikuko Kozu, Makeup Artist: Yumi Yokose, Sound Recordist: Kenichi Benitani, Music: Yosuke Yamashita, Kazuko Kuriyama, Casting: Takefumi Yoshikawa, Still Photographers: Kenji Ishiguro, Yukio Kozu

Cast: Akira Emoto as Dr. Fuu Akagi, Kumiko Aso as Sonoko, Juro Kara as Umemoto, Masanori Sera as Toriumi, Jacques Gamblin as Piet, Keiko Matsuzaka as Tomiko, Misa Shimizu as Gin, Yukiya Kitamura as Sankichi, Masato Yamada as Masuyo, Tomorrowo Taguchi as Nosaka, Masatô Ibu as Ikeda, Wayne Doster as Robert Hugh Harper, Ayumi Ito, Shoten Kadokawa, Kazuhiko Kanayama as Sakashita as Kozuhiko Kanayama, Tsutomu Miura, Tohoku Shinsha, Shinya Yamamoto as Shin-yo Yamamoto, Hatsuo Yamatani as Hatsuo Yamaya, Shoichi Ozawa.

Akai Hashi No Shita No Nurui Mizu, Warm Water Under a Red Bridge (2001):

Production Companies: Eisei Gekijo, Imamura Productions, Maru Limited, Nikkatsu Corporation, Executive Producer: Masaya Nakamura, Producers: Tadao Yutaka, Umeo Itou, Tomiyasu Ishikawa, Hisashi Iino, Planning: Naoto Sarukawa, Based on a Novel by: Yo Henmi, Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Daisuke Tengan, Motofumi Tomikawa, Editing: Hajime Okayasu, Assistant Directors: Masayuki Taniguchi, Yoshinobu Yasuno, Shungo Shimizu, Masahide Kuwahara, Cinematography: Shigeru Komatsubara, Lighting: Hideaki Yamakawa, Chief Camera Assistant: Hideo Mori, Camera Assistant: Shinji Heboki, Manabu Matsumiya, Production Design: Hisao Inagaki, Sound Recordist: Kenichi Benitani, Music: Shinichiro Ikebe

Cast: Kôji Yakusho as Yosuke Sasano, Misa Shimizu as Saeko Aizawa, Mitsuko Baisho as Mitsu Aizawa, Mansaku Fuwa as Gen, Isao Natsuyagi as Masayuki Uomi, Yukiya Kitamura as Shintaro Uomi, Hijiri Kojima as Mika Tagami, Toshie Negishi as Tomoko Sasano, Sumiko Sakamoto as Masako Yamada, Gadarukanaru Taka as Taizo Tachibana, Mickey Curtis as Nobuyuki Ohnishi, Takao Yamada as Kazuo Namamura, Katsuo Nakamura as Takao Yamada, Kazuo Kitamura as Taro.

11'09'01 – September 11 (Japan Segment, 2002),

Production Company: Imamura Productions, Produced by Catherine Dussart, Written by: Daisuke Tengen, Editing: Hajime Okayasu, Cinematography: Masakaza Oka, Music: Taro Iwashiro, Sound: Masashi Tara

Cast: Tomorrowo Taguchi, Kumiko Aso, Akira Emoto, Mitsuko Baisho, Tetsuro Tamba, Ken Ogata

Television Work:

In Search of Unreturned Soldiers (Mikikanhei O Otte) Parts I and II (1971)

The Pirates of Bubuan (Bubuan No Kaizoku) (1972)

Muhomatsu Returns Home (Muhomatsu Kokyo Ni Kaeru) (1973)

In Search of Unreturned Soldiers (Mikikanhei O Otte) Part III (1975)

Two Men Named Yoshinobu (Tsuiseki/Futari No Yoshinobu) (1975)

DISCOGRAPHY

Region 2 Japan:

Nusumareta yokujo (Stolen Desire) + Nishi Ginza ekimae (In Front of West Ginza Station)

Hateshinaki yokubo (Endless Desire)

Nianchan (My Second Brother)

Buta to Gunkan (Pigs and Battleships AKA The Flesh is Hot)

Nippon Konchuki (Insect Woman)

Akai Satsui (Intentions of Murder)

Ero Jishi tachi yori Jinmongaku Nyumon (The Pornographers)

Ningen Johatsu (A Man Vanishes)

Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo (Profound Desire of the Gods)

Documentary Collection 1 (Mikikanhei wo otte / Marey Hen, Bubuan no Kaizoku, Tooku e ikitai, and Ore no Shimokita)

Documentary Collection 2 (Kikanhei wo otte / Thai Hen, Muhomatsu Kokyo ni Kaeru, and Otonashii Nihonjin)

Documentary Collection 3 (Zoku Mikikanhei wo otte, and Karayukisan)

Fukushû suruwa wareniari (Vengeance is Mine)

Eijanaika (Why Not?)

Narayama Bushiku (Ballad of Narayama)

Zegen

Kuroi Ame (Black Rain)

Kanzo Sensei (Dr. Akagi)

Akai hashi no shita no nurui mizu (Warm Water Under a Red Bridge)

Unagi (The Eel, 134min)

Unagi (The Eel, 117 min)

11'09'01 - SEPTEMBER 11 (contributed short film)

Nikkatsu Works Box Set Vol. 1 (contains: Nusumareta yokujo, Nishi Ginza ekimae, Hateshinaki yokubo, Nianchan, and Buta to gunkan)

Nikkatsu Works Box Set Vol. 2 (contains: Nippon Konchuki, Akai Satsui, Ero Jishi tachi yori Jinmongaku Nyumon, Kamigami no Fukaki Yokubo)

Region 2 UK:

Fukushû suruwa wareniari (Vengeance is Mine)

Akai hashi no shita no nurui mizu (Warm Water Under a Red Bridge)

Region 2 France:

Eijanaika (Why Not?) + Fukushû suruwa wareniari (Vengeance is Mine):

Narayama Bushiku (Ballad of Narayama)

Kuroi Ame (Black Rain)

Kanzo Sensei (Dr. Akagi)

Akai hashi no shita no nurui mizu (Warm Water Under a Red Bridge)

Unagi (The Eel)

Region 2 Italy:

11'09''01

Region 1 USA Canada:

Ero Jishi tachi yori Jinmongaku Nyumon (The Pornographers)

Kuroi Ame (Black Rain)

Kanzo Sensei (Dr. Akagi)

Unagi (The Eel)

Akai hashi no shita no nurui mizu (Warm Water Under a Red Bridge)

11'09''01 - SEPTEMBER 11 (contributed short film)

Region 3 China:

Fukushû suruwa wareniari (Vengeance is Mine)

Eijanaika (Why Not?)

Naryama Bushiku (Ballad of Narayama)

Akai hashi no shita no nurui mizu (Warm Water Under a Red Bridge)

Region 3 Taiwan:

Akai hashi no shita no nurui mizu (Warm Water Under a Red Bridge)

Unagi (The Eel)

Region 3 Korea:

Naryama Bushiku (Ballad of Naryama)

Kanzo Sensei (Dr. Akagi)