

Rethinking Nature in Post-Fukushima Japan

Facing the Crisis

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Masumura Yasuzō

A Breakthrough in the Wall of Japanese Cinema

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Abstract A few fundamental events contributed to create a revolution in the world of Japanese cinema during the 1950s, drastically cutting its links with the past and stimulating a completely different way to make movies. One of the main authors to stress the need for a complete change was Masumura Yasuzo. He had been studying for two years (1952-54) in Rome, an experience which enabled him to introduce a new kind of approach to human beings into Japan. Masumura's refusal for the classical atmosphere of Japanese cinema, often referring to nature as a metaphor of the existence, together with what he had learnt in Italy, gave birth to some of his masterpieces, where the fictional universe works as a frame for depicting a dialectic mixing of freedom and individuality.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Masumura Yasuzō's Years of Learning and the Italian Experience. – 3 Back to Japan and the Debut as a Filmmaker. – 4 The Need to Break with the Past. – 5 The Reactions of the New Cinema and the Challenge of *Giants and Toys*.

Keywords Masumura Yasuzō. Japanese Cinema. Nature. Japanese New Wave. Film production. 1960s.

1 Introduction

During the 1950s, Japanese cinema reached its peak not only on an artistic and narrative level, but also from a business point of view. As a consequence of the huge number of foreign movies imported to Japan, the number of movie theatres quickly increased and the business soon became very profitable. Just as in the previous decades, all the production companies controlled theatre networks where they could distribute the movies they produced, a rigidly composed structure also intended to exclude the works made by independents without their distribution control. However, the number of the major studios that shared the market was doomed to increase, and after a few years the oligopoly was formed by six big companies: Tōhō, Shintōhō, Shōchiku, Daiei, Tōei, and Nikkatsu.

The film market expansion met the audience's growing love for the Seventh Art. To satisfy its appetite, the distributors organised frequent

screening programs, quickly replacing the films in the playbill with new ones and resorting to the ploy of the double bill program. Thus the budget to make a movie was usually very limited, and the production system was generally meticulous to avoid any waste of funds: the staff had to plan every detail before the shooting, working at an unrelenting pace with ungenerous wages. But in spite of the rigidity of this system, an unheard-of freedom of expression was guaranteed to the Japanese filmmakers. This strategy was amply repaid by the audience: in 1958 the maximum number of spectators attending the screenings was registered, although the national broadcasting organisation NHK had started the television broadcast from 1953 and was becoming a dangerous adversary for the film industry.

It was mainly due to Italy that Japanese cinema was officially recognised abroad, thanks to the Golden Lion awarded to Kurosawa Akira's *Rashōmon* at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. Giuliana Stramigioli, who was responsible for the Italia Film branch in Japan, proposed the selection of the movie: she had watched the Japanese screening and strongly believed that it had good chances to win. The award to this film elicited conflicting feelings: from one point of view it represented the victory of the whole country, as a boost in confidence for a destroyed population still under the control of the US Occupation Forces. At the same time, it had raised the issue of offering an exotic image of Japan, winking to the Western audience - which was one of the main criticism to the director when it was first screened in Japan, in particular for its analytic style of narration. The same kind of criticism was advanced in the Western context where, together with those who considered the movie as a masterpiece, many film critics judged it as an exotic film and tried to compare it with other Western works, even explaining the "*Rashōmon* phenomenon" as the result of the Occupation.¹

Once the way was opened towards the West, international successes were almost a common occurrence. Japan had triumphantly entered the film festival scene, mainly following *Rashōmon*'s winning formula by setting the narration in the past. The internationalisation of Japanese cinema induced filmmakers to improve the quality of their works, stimulating the creation of new narratives and new styles that could better compete with the film industry abroad. Thanks to these interactions with other countries' cinematic styles, Japan was now able to value its own capabilities and reach its much praised achievements, often through the assimilation of film codes and syntaxes from different cultures.

The Treaty of Peace of San Francisco, which began in 1952, served to allocate Japan among the key players in the international economic and

1 In the article "Rashomon et le cinéma japonais" published in 1952 in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Curtis Harrington explained how American film critics considered the movie: "For them, *Rashomon* is a Japanese post-war film, thus its excellence must be due to the supervision and assistance supplied by the American occupiers" (quoted in Richie 1996, 141).

political arena. It also put an end to the American Occupation and – most importantly – sowed the seeds of a new national awareness: no longer plunged into a “melodramatic” reality (i.e., overall destitution, a government ruled by a foreign power, a strong and coercive pressure to adopt democracy), Japanese people could finally turn to the most suitable cultural course in line with their future perspectives. Moreover, they could now also establish additional elements unheard of in the feudal past: the opportunity of acting in total freedom, individualism and personal responsibility.

2 Masumura Yasuzō’s Years of Learning and the Italian Experience

Born in 1924 in Kōfu, Masumura Yasuzō 増村 保造 expressed his love for cinema when very young, showing an open preference for European films – his favourite director being Jean Renoir – which he could often watch thanks to his friendship with the son of the owner of a movie theatre. He was not interested in Japanese cinema, apart from a few works he had appreciated and watched many times during the War, especially *Muhōmatsu no issho* (Rickshaw Man) (Inagaki Hiroshi, 1943) and *Sugata Sanshirō* (Kurosawa Akira, 1943) (*Nihon eiga jinmei jiten* 1997, 746). During World War II he entered the Faculty of Law at the prestigious Tokyo University, where he had the opportunity to meet, among the others, the future writer Mishima Yukio.² In 1948 he got a part-time job at Daiei, working for four years as an assistant for the director Koishi Eiichi. Thanks to the money he had earned, he was able to enrol once again at the university and enter the Faculty of Philosophy.

Meanwhile, he also devoted himself to writing: among his many works, an essay on Kurosawa Akira won a prize at the Kinema Jumpō contest (Masumura 1999, 19). When Masumura graduated, he was awarded a scholarship to study filmmaking at the Experimental Centre of Cinematography in Rome, even if cinema was not among his favourite interests. Here he was able to count on extraordinary teachers, including Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti, three filmmakers who had started their careers in Neo-realism that had soon shaped their own personal styles which had little to do with the artistic movement. Thanks to them, Masumura experienced the leftover atmosphere of the recent Neo-realistic influence. However, although many scholars believe that Masumura’s period of stay in Rome pushed him towards the Neo-realistic

² Years later, Mishima starred as an actor in *Karakkaze yarō* (Afraid to Die, 1960) by Masumura.

atmosphere,³ he would soon demonstrate to have followed a more personal style in the aftermath on Neo-realism, as in the case of filmmakers such as Visconti, who had distanced themselves from this movement.

During the period spent in Italy, Masumura actively participated in Rome's dense cultural life, also meeting young people who, like himself, believed that cinema was crossing a crucial moment of change. They were sort of living in the middle of the crossroads of European cultural trends, which would create new forms of style. According to Masumura, European cinema presented the human being as a central figure in the 'reality' of life; it was therefore indispensable to grasp all the historical and aesthetic nuances linking men to everyday life experiences.

Thanks to his active role in the many Italian cultural activities, Masumura also had the opportunity to contribute with some essays to some of the most important film magazines of the time. Among his contributions, the most important was the first history of Japanese cinema ever published in Italy, *Profilo storico del cinema giapponese* (Historical Profile of Japanese Cinema), which he wrote for *Bianco&Nero* in 1954.⁴ This long article is fundamental to understand how the filmmaker was going to create his style, starting from what he wrote on contemporary Japanese cinema and on the "neo-romantic" tendency that influenced auteurs like Kurosawa Akira:

Their clear aim was to break once and for from the international schemes Japanese cinema had been restrained to, namely the minute and realistic description of family events which were often described with a strong and nostalgic sentimentalism. Indeed, this had produced examples of a very high level, but the time had come to break free and to open up to new themes and new style achievements. According to these young filmmakers' opinion, Japanese cinema needed profusion of fantasy and invention instead of the usual and traditional narrative modes, strength of hyperboles and a firm narrative structure instead of a pale and melodramatic intimistic realism, fruitfulness and a hopeful overabundance of entertainment elements instead of the exhausted observation of the mere aesthetical form, the vivid representation of what is ugly instead of the sentimental painting of beauty. (Masumura 1984a, 232)

3 David Desser, for example, wrote that the influence of Neo-realism is evident in "his preference for location shooting and his focus on the lower classes. On the other hand, like many of the neo-realist directors, he shifted his focus slightly, concentrating on how human desires can change one's environment seen through a juxtaposition of the freedom of the individual against the constraints of the social system" (Desser 1988, 42).

4 It was published in January, in the number 11-12 of the film magazine. I refer to the reprinted version in Masumura 1984a. All translations from the original (Italian) are mine.

However, in his essay Masumura also underlined that between 1949 and 1951, especially as a consequence of the transformation of the Korean political structure and the rearmament of Japan under the control of US Occupation Forces, home dramas had increased, representing:

the realistic-intimistic works in which common people could identify their own faces, their own life, their own problems; in other words, portrayed in an honest and reliable way, where social investigations were carried out on a large scale and where polemical stances and in-depth analyses of the reality were outlined rather lazily but efficiently. Japanese people were once again inclined to retreat into their small familiar shelter, and through these movies they perceived a kind of psychological and moral empathy. (235)

Masumura was specifically referring to Ozu Yasujirō's *Banshun* (Late Spring, 1949) and *Bakushū* (Early Summer, 1951). Of the first one he denounced "a feeling of narrowness and oppression, like something too rigidly separated from reality" (Masumura 1984a, 235), and of the second movie the fact that "the director fails to analyse some actual situations which were the cause of slight disagreements, which could not be solved with the traditional familiar love" (236). According to Masumura a similar problem was also traceable in Ozu's masterpiece *Tōkyō monogatari* (Tokyo Story, 1953), where "a new attitude of the author towards reality and life emerges, a new pessimistic and gloomy idea, completely aimed at bringing back the nostalgic memory of the past and to refuse the new human relationships established by the post-war generation" (Masumura 1984a, 246).

In his "Conclusion" to the historical profile he had outlined, Masumura definitively declares what he dislikes of Japanese cinema, in other words what he thinks of the difference with Europe. In particular, he affirms:

For long periods of its history, Japanese cinema has been the result of a deformed society, where an absolutist political power dominated people to the extent of depriving them of all the freedom of a civil life, and made every ideal, every hope, every genuine impulse impossible. [...] On a social and political level, Japanese cinema was compelled to remain on a level of neutrality, or even agnosticism and indifference. Critics, especially foreigners, had frequently put emphasis on some peculiar and constant aspects of Japanese cinema: fatalism, love for nature, cruelty, refinement of taste, mysticism, and, on an expressive level, the 'large' time of narration. [...] After all these peculiarities, fundamental in Japanese movies, are nothing but the exact correspondence to the traits of narrative, and still more, of visual arts, which are so different from those of the visual arts typical of Italian Renaissance. At the time, art was the open and direct expression of the passion of the people who had created a new ideal of

beauty, in total harmony with the real spiritual and environmental conditions; the result was a masculine art, realistic in the noblest meaning of the word. [...] Japanese people have always lacked the sense of sociality, meant as the entirety of responsibility and cooperation among the members of the community useful to reach common purposes. (249-50)

In the same lines, Masumura also underlined how the lack of a “vivid and eloquent” mimicry of Japanese actors was the result of a general self-control which had always lead them to hide the most genuine feeling, and at the end he concludes his essay noticing how Japanese cinema lacks genuine comedies, in particular with honest and possibly critical connections to society.

We can thus assert that the two most important teachings which Masumura learnt in Italy included how to treat the actors, and understanding the dialectic power offered by comedy and more generally by the irony suffused in everyday life situations. As for the actors, the great Italian filmmakers had influenced him greatly, especially Visconti’s idea that an actor possesses the necessary human qualities useful to create a character, which became one of Masumura’s main goals to achieve. To underline the weight of the character’s interior self, he assumed that it was necessary to confer a particular rhythm to both the editing and the dialogue, and just like the Italian filmmakers Masumura himself later privileged modern characters mainly chosen among poor people and portrayed in frequent close-ups: this guaranteed the prevailing role of human beings over locations and gave them a political centrality and a certain consciousness of reality.

On the other hand, the comedy genre had reached very high stylistic levels in Italy, for example thanks to some movies by Renato Castellani like the easy-going *Sotto il sole di Roma* (Under the Sun of Rome, 1948) which in many ways anticipated Pasolini’s poetry; or the perfect synthesis of irony and drama in Visconti’s *Bellissima* (1951); and finally, the general ability of Fellini to symbolise human monstrosity in grotesque forms, like he did for *Lo sceicco bianco* (The White Sheik, 1952) and *I Vitelloni* (1953), greatly influenced by his previous experience as a cartoonist.

3 Back to Japan and the Debut as a Filmmaker

When Masumura returned to Japan, he finally decided to devote himself to filmmaking. He went back to work at Daiei, where he initially was employed as an assistant for Mizoguchi Kenji and, after the director’s death, for Ichikawa Kon. At the same time, he continued his activity as a film critic, writing for specialised magazines such as *Eiga Hyōron*.

This was a time in Japan when the number of movies portraying young people (a film genre known as *seishun eiga*, “films on youth”) increased

on the big screen. This genre was representative of the people's desire for innovation, a need that had taken shape in post-war Japan. In particular, a new film genre produced by Nikkatsu and known as "Sun Tribe Films" (*taiyōzoku eiga*) achieved a resounding success in 1956. These movies were adapted from Ishihara Shintarō's novels,⁵ including the Akutagawa Prize winner *Taiyō no kisetsu* (Season of the Sun, 1955). His works shook the literary scene by introducing a new social model, according to which the post-war generation could do nothing but refuse every ethical and moral aspect shaped by their parents. In place of the traditional virtues, the "new" tormented youth were absorbed by extreme sensations, such as sex (not love, just the physical act) and violence. Among the definitions given to the prize-winning writer, many critics labelled him as a "right-wing anarchist", which later proved to be true when he got a political position in the Liberal Democratic Party.

His way to address the young people's energy was so popular to become a huge trend and his novels were all bestsellers. Many of his works were adapted to movies until the 1970s, and Ishihara himself directed one - although not favourably received - in 1958, *Wakai kemono* (The Young Beast). One of the most successful adaptations is *Kurutta kajitsu* (Crazed Fruit, 1956⁶), scripted and directed by Nakahira Kō. It tells the story of two brothers, both attracted to the same woman, a very simple plot that offers the chance to tangibly approach the disillusioned and violent point of view of these "rebels without a cause". Starting with the Sun Tribe films, Japanese cinema would later give more and more visibility, although from different political fronts and analytical evaluations, to the subversive impulse of young people, which would reach its peak in the 1960s and emerge in the new genre known as "Shōchiku Nouvelle Vague".⁷

In this cultural atmosphere Masumura's debut movie, *Kuchizuke* (Kisses, 1957), was produced at Daiei. With the Sun Tribe works he shared only the disillusion of young people towards the world of adults' and its social responsibilities, and their quest for strong and immediate emotions; everything else was strongly influenced by all that Masumura had learnt in Italy. In this movie, the young couple (the male character Kin'ichi and

5 Ishihara began his career as a writer, but later produced also as a scriptwriter and filmmaker. In recent years he chose the political career and was the Governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012.

6 This film was also distributed in Italy with the title of the first novel by Ishihara, *La stagione del sole* (Season of the Sun).

7 This Japanese "New Wave" cinema took the name of the production company (Shōchiku) which first launched the genre by the works of the young filmmakers Ōshima Nagisa, Shinoda Masahiro and Yoshida Kijū, and aimed to propose a kind of Japanese version of the French Nouvelle Vague movement. However, these authors refused the label and soon all became independent, upsetting the film scene with completely new styles and themes.

the charming Akiko) belong to the lower class of a developing country, compelled to a hard life because of their parents' faults. Both their fathers are imprisoned: Kin'ichi's as a repeat offender, Akiko's as a cheater, who had turned to crime due to the hardness of life. Both their mothers are somehow "missing": the boy's had left her family years before because of her husband's behaviour and Akiko's mother is always ill and hospitalised. The young couple not only has to struggle to survive, but needs to find the money to have their fathers released, even if this means selling their bodies or partially giving up their personal freedom – ancient violations which they manage to overcome thanks to their pure innocence.

Right from the opening titles, we sense the lightness of their existence. A tracking shot among the leafy branches of a long line of trees stimulates three different effects: it reveals in advance the "motion" their lives are compelled to; it offers the quick rhythm of the editing and dialogues to come; it also evokes the natural setting (traditionally present in Japanese cinema) the movie is soon going to detach itself from. The first scene after the titles symbolises the tragedy of the boy's life: walking alone along a desolate street, he stares at the hermetic prison building he is soon going to enter. A lorry overtakes him lifting up a cloud of dust, which the boy breathes and immediately spits out, an evident metaphor of his miserable life. It is clearly evident that the director does not intend to be melodramatic: the first dialogue between father and son is extremely rapid and a-sentimental, which immediately displays the sense of urgency of the characters, while their bodies fill the screen by means of close-ups and extreme angles.

It is during this dialogue that Kin'ichi meets Akiko, and is attracted by the girl's uncontrollable crying caused by her worry for her father's health. The young couple borrows a motorbike – also their joy in riding is illusory, since they do not own the motorbike. Another metaphor of their desperation for not having anything to lose and for not being able to completely count on themselves, they bet the little money they have on a bike race. Thanks to the little sum they win, they manage to spend together a light-hearted day before going back to the harsh reality.

The couple represents the plague in the economically growing society that Japan is trying to create, a cross-section of the suburban marginalisation. At a symbolic level, the institutions presented in the movie (the prison and the hospital where Akiko's mother is in care) do not guarantee tutelage unless the fees and the extras are paid out, which of course affects the fate of the poor people. It is a pessimistic view of the services offered by society, but all the same Masumura reserves a happy epilogue for the couple: the boy will join his mother, now a well-off woman, and the girl will be able to pay for her father's bail. Despite the happy ending, the narrated events *de facto* prove that the idea of traditional family had irreversibly changed, although it was still frequently presented in many movies contemporary to *Kisses*.

Like in Fellini's *I Vitelloni*, throughout the whole film we perceive a sense of freshness, without running the risk of falling into complicated events, but at the same time letting apparently unimportant moments go by, which are however the tangible vibration of their lives. Masumura's refusal for the classical atmosphere of Japanese cinema, together with what he had learned in Italy, led him to select emblematic places where the human existence unfolds – the jail, the streets, the narrow rooms where the couple lives. Just like Michelangelo Antonioni did in his *Cronaca di un amore* (Story of a Love Affair, 1950), Masumura explores the places as if they were frames where his camera can flow in a kind of dance around the bodies, thanks to a continuous variation of angles, close-ups and medium shots, since he believed that people are the true leading characters of the images, but reality as well.

4 The Need to Break with the Past

In a time span of a few months from his first movie *Kisses* in 1957, Masumura directed three more films: *Aozora musume* (The Blue Sky Maiden), *Danryū* (Warm Current), and *Hyoheki* (The Precipice). *The Blue Sky Maiden* belongs to the genre known as “films about mothers” (*haha mono*), undoubtedly one of Daiei's strong points, traditionally melodramatic. However, thanks to Masumura's gaze, drama becomes a sentimental and nervously narrated, to such an extent that it almost ridicules melodrama itself. It tells the story of Yuko, the young illegitimate daughter born after her father's extramarital affair. Although constantly oppressed by her brothers, the girl is optimistic and hopes in a better future, here represented by the blue sky.

Warm Current is the remake of the eponymous 1939 Yoshimura Kōzaburō's movie, an adaptation from a novel by Kishida Kunio, now scripted by Shirasaka Yoshio with a more lively rhythm of dialogue and a subtle ironical *verve*. It tells about the complicated sentimental relationship between the members of the staff and the managers of a hospital in Tokyo. Whereas in the 1939 version grace, dignity, the fear of losing one's own reputation had prevailed over the feelings, in Masumura's version passion and desire are the core of the characters' impulses, to such an extent that in one scene which takes place in a crowded station of Tokyo, the female character (starred by Hidari Sachiko) screams to the man: “Being your lover or your mistress is fine by me! I'll be waiting!”.

The Precipice can be classified as belonging to a genre between the romantic and the thriller, shot in both the metropolitan dimension of the capital city and in a mountain-climbing adventure set in the snowy Japanese Alps. Two friends are climbing a mountain, when suddenly one of the two falls and dies. The survivor is suspected to have killed his companion

as they were both in love of the same woman, the beautiful and married Minako. Her portrait is among the first strong femme fatale characters in Masumura's cinema, for whom desire and passion are inseparable feelings.⁸

These three movies, just like the first one, had been produced as entertainment films, but between the lines they displayed some elements that attracted the audience and film critics. They had also caught the attention of many of Masumura's detractors, who had always detected a lack of feeling in the style he used. As well, they had accused him of characterising people too emphatically, thus creating a detachment from reality, and of failing to describe the environment and the atmosphere. In February 1958, before making his most successful movie *Kyojin to gangu* (Giants and Toys, 1958), in response to the critics who had accused him of neglecting human feelings by describing the characters with eccentric exaggeration, showing no more than aridity and detachment, Masumura wrote an essay for the magazine *Eiga Hyōron*, "Aru benmei - Jōcho to shirijitsu to furi iki ni se o mukete (A Justification: Turning My back on Emotion, Truth, and Atmosphere), where he stated:

They say my work is arid and deprived of feelings. Moreover, it has been accused of emphasizing the funniness of the characters, of my being frivolous and displaying a poor sense of reality. The tempo is excessively fast, the description of the environment and the atmosphere is lacking: this is why my work may seem arid and detached. In one way, these critics are correct. However, if I am allowed to justify myself, I would just like to say that I intentionally reject sentiment, adulterate reality, and deny the atmosphere. (Masumura 1984b, 111)

In substance, starting from this incipit he was not only demonstrating his strong desire to give a serious jolt to the mainstream Japanese cinema, but above all he was introducing what he had learnt in Italy, especially in his use of the comic sense to describe the dramatic situations of everyday life.

In his essay, Masumura also explained to what extent the Japanese cinema of the past had represented feelings strongly influenced by the social environment, how his compatriots were no longer able to give voice to their own true emotions and desires, and how the *truth/atmosphere* pair had always been aimed to describing the environment rather than the people living in it. This meant refusing the lyricism of the great filmmakers, discarding a series of rhetorical conventions which had gradually

⁸ Years later, during an interview Masumura declared: "Unlike the man, who is nothing but a shadow, the woman is a being really existing, an extremely free being - that's how I consider eroticism". From "Entretien avec Masumura Yasuzo", in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 224 October 1970 (quoted in Le Pape 1970, 67).

multiplied in Japanese cinema, and putting an end to that sense of “resignation” which up to that moment had led to an existence lived only half of its potential: “I hate sentiment, and this is because in Japanese cinema it has always been represented as a controlled, harmonious, resigned, sad, looser, and elusive manner” (Masumura 1984b, 111).

Writing about his works where “I only aim at describing passion and the will of those who really live” (114), he also explained: “This choice has strongly been influenced by the two-year stay in Italy. When in Europe, for the very first time I had the feeling that I could finally understand man. [...] In Europe, you can experience the beauty and the strength of the human being. [...] In Europe, the “human being” is something real” (114-15). He ended his essay firmly refusing to belong to any of the two main successful film trends in Japan: the naturalistic one, describing “poor people with no hopes”, and the one based on realistic and ideological values which “describe the faults of society in an ideal way” (116). These approaches induced people to fail their social responsibilities, seeking refuge in a comfortable resignation.

5 The Reactions of the New Cinema and the Challenge of *Giants and Toys*

A few months after the publication of Masumura’s essay, the future director Ōshima Nagisa, who was already active as a film critic, wrote an article in the film magazine *Eiga Hihyō* with the title “Sore wa toppakō ka? - Nihon eiga no kindai shugishatachi” (Is It a Breakthrough? - The Modernists of Japanese Film) where he put together all the recent changes which had occurred in Japanese cinema and foresaw the dynamics that would soon develop. Besides, in his movies Ōshima would later launch the era of the New Cinema of the 1960s, and for a long time he would be the true leading figure of a general revolution of themes and styles, which inevitably affected the industry which was soon ‘invaded’ by independent filmmakers.

In his essay, Ōshima made it clear that he considered the directors Masumura and Nakahira Kō as well as the scriptwriter Shirasaka Yoshio as the pioneers of modernism. About Masumura, and especially referring to the movie *Kisses*, he wrote:

[When] used a freely moving camera to depict a pair of young motorcycle riding lovers [in *Kisses*], this new generation had assumed a place in Japanese cinema as an intense, unstoppable force that could no longer be ignored. [...] His characters are anxious, the environment and the stories are contemporary. The descriptions are tangible, made by means of guidelines of a modern thinking. [...] It is today more than ever necessary to analyse this current, to study it, to convey and support it, because

it is from here that it will be possible to open a breakthrough in the wall of Japanese cinema. (Ōshima 2009, 25-6⁹)

Just when Ōshima was writing this article, Masumura was shooting *Giants and Toys*, a movie Ōshima had high hopes for:

The duo Masumura-Shirasaka is going to shoot *Kyojin to gangu*, adapted from the original novel by Kaikō Takeshi. In this film they will bravely face the theme of human dignity, jeopardized by the monstrous processes of the capitalistic society. From a formal point of view, *Kyojin to gangu* seems in line with the movies made until now, but the new thematic element, i.e., the accurate description of the social mechanisms, will inevitably influence and condition the narrative form. How can this problem be solved? Masumura will probably describe the process through which an energy destroys itself and then endlessly is revived, giving the characters a powerful and unusual dynamism. With no doubt, he will try to testify his faith to the individual. (Ōshima 2009, 33)

Giants and Toys was first distributed in June 1958. The plot is mainly centred on the fierce competition among rival confectionery manufacturers, which alienate the staff involved in their promotional campaigns. The young and new employee, Nishi, somehow enters into the good grace of the aspiring director Goda, and does his utmost to satisfy all his requests. Their firm is one of the three that is competing on the market and is in the middle of its promotion. Goda chooses a girl, Kiyoko, among the common people and manages to transform her into a star, who will serve to launch the campaign. However, all the characters, including Nishi, Goda and the ambitious star, are bound to lose their personal and sentimental freedom and in two particular cases health is also put at stake to pursue the business objective. Masumura portrays this situation through a sharp look, somehow anticipating the Japanese New Wave cinema style.

Just as in *Kisses*, the “manifesto” of this film is immediately made evident from the images presented in the opening titles: a picture of Kiyoko, which is multiplied in many images and fragmented – a kind of “one, no one and one hundred thousand”, the alienation of individuality, like in Luigi Pirandello’s famous novel. A similar image opens the first scene: the leading character Nishi is walking in a crowd of men looking just like him, all walking in the same direction, all heading to their firm. The camera shifts vertically to the highest floor of the building. The president is observing the men below and says: “It’s a human river, the more sweets they eat the more we will earn. They are like candies to me”. To further underline

9 All translations from the original (Japanese) are mine.

this image with a new analogy, in one of the following scenes the candy production line is shown. Besides, the girl who has been chosen as the firm testimonial appears for the first time behind a glass display for candies, thus becoming a “product” herself.

The competition among the companies is the kick off for these insect-like existence. This competition can also been interpreted as the one existing among film studios and between cinema and television. Even if referring to a different field (the advertising world), Masumura’s *Giant and Toys* shares many elements with the ephemeral location of Visconti’s *Bellissima*.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, both movies tell of the expectations and hopes of the ordinary people in living in the post-war society. They live in a sort of dream in which they try to play an active role, a behaviour largely based on the American model. In *Giant and Toys* the characters often refer to the American example, which also represents the real giant they have to uselessly fight. Advertising, as well as the cinema industry in *Bellissima*, are both worlds with no moral codes and based on false myths. Both directors analyse these settings with an dispassionate attitude, aware that dreams are doomed to smash into reality and illusions are destined to fail. Their approach is direct and disillusioned, as well as sincere.

Another resemblance with *Bellissima* is the way this film builds fictitious “heroes”, specifically the little girl in the Italian masterpiece and the young woman chosen as a star in the Japanese movie. Both are “produced” by the system, and both become icons that the common people are ready to take up. To underline this nuance, both the characterisations swing between the comic and the dramatic, with a touching overtone. On the whole, the two movies offer a slice of life of two countries that are trying to emerge through careerism, slapdash attitudes, empty promises and celluloid illusions. Masumura strengthens the use of allegory:

The final destination of such symbolic mise-en-scène is the allegory. In the first dialogue scene of the film, a lighter that fails to catch becomes the overemphatic focus of all the characters’ gazes, leading to a montage of fast dissolves illustrating the caramel business, all overlaid by the glinting reflection of the lighter. [...] It takes only a small interpretive step from this coupling of production and reproduction to see the regular clicking of the lighter flint as a metaphor for the motion of the film through camera and projector that is the condition of our seeing it. (Raine 2007, 160)

Screened at Venice Film Festival in 1958, film critics did not get the allegorical structure of *Giants and Toys*, but they rather appreciated its style,

¹⁰ Masumura knew and appreciated their work, and in fact he was the author of a special issues on Visconti for *Kinema Jumpō* in the series *Sekai no eigasakka* (Movie Writers of the World) (no. 4, 1970).

the fast rhythm of dialogues, and its visual richness. In Japan it was successful beyond any expectation, to such an extent that it was included in the prestigious “top ten” compilation annually presented by the film magazine *Kinema Junpō*. However, there were also negative reviews, among the others the one from Ōshima who accused Masumura of having failed in keeping the necessary distance from the subject and of not having provided a political instrument appropriated for that age. This film also represented a showcase for the author himself, who became a symbol of the renewal of Japanese cinema. However, when the New Wave movies were screened, the balance of interest related to innovation shifted towards more politically and socially involved directors, who soon overshadowed Masumura, even if he had paved the way to the disarray of the pre-existing codes.

In his following works, Masumura’s interest for characters with a strong self and unrestrained desires mainly started to focus on the women’s world, since he believed that a woman could more freely state her own individuality, especially when social and moral limits prevail, and could better adapt to the idea of living harmoniously in group. For example, female characters are the keystone of some of his movies, all produced by Daiei and many starring the actress Wakao Ayako, a kind of alter ego of the filmmaker. The young woman in the love triangle of *Manji* (1964), the nurse Sakura in *Akai tenshi* (Red Angel, 1966), the tattooed femme fatale in *Irezumi* (Spider Tattoo, 1982) are only few examples of his portraits of strong and sensual women, dominant over men who not only are weak, but whose only desire is to give pleasure to their partners.¹¹

Many film critics later said that Masumura had not kept faith with his initial intentions, they accused him of having gradually shifted to a more commercial and successful cinema, and that instead of trying to open a breakthrough in the majors’ system, he preferred to comply with Daiei’s directives. However, his cinema should be reconsidered in the light of a personal interpretation of individuality, with high aesthetic peaks, but with no exaggerated study of appearance.

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11 His movies are often provided with a strong narrative structure which is partly due to the novels they adapt. Almost all these works are written by contemporary authors, including Ōe Kenzaburō (*Nise daigakusei*, A False Student, 1960), Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (*Manji*, Spider Tattoo; *Chijin no ai*, A Fool’s Love, 1967), Kawabata Yasunari (*Senbazuru*, Thousand Cranes, 1969), Edogawa Ranpo (*Blind Beast*).

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