

## Expressionism in Film

### Donald Richie

Expressionism was perhaps Germany's first notable aesthetic influence on Japan. This style, the term first being used in 1911, was more a label than a school, an attitude than a manner. Its symptoms were those of late romanticism - a sense of imminent crisis; a feeling torn between desire for stillness and urge toward chaos, a disjunction between images of rigidity and the violence within.

The artist sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, attempted to project himself and his highly personal vision of the world. Dramatically, the style was seen as a reaction against realism, an attempt to show inner psychological realities. The stage origins are perhaps to be found in the Swedish writer August Strindberg's *The Dream Play* (1907) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) as well as in the work of the Germans Franz Wedekind and Ernst Toller, dramatists whose plays were early performed in Japan. A Tokyo favorite was Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* (*Von Morgens bis Mitternacht*, 1916), both the stage and the screen version. Literary critic and translator of Kaiser, Toller and Wedekind, Kubo Sakae later went to Berlin to study; it also much influenced the expressionistic work of students and admirers such as Kinoshita Junji, one of Japan's foremost modern playwrights.

It was especially the film that popularized what the Japanese understood as Expressionism. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*, 1920) directed by Robert Wiene and often thought of as the first expressionist film, showed in Tokyo in February 1920, shortly after its Berlin premiere. All together, it has been estimated that close to two dozen expressionist films were released in Japan between 1920 and 1927. These included Karl Heinz Martin's *From Morn to Midnight* (1920), Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, 1921), Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and *Faust* (1926) Artur Robison's *Warning Shadows* (*Schatten*, 1923), and Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the last of the line and the film that summed up the trend.

Expressionism was also regarded as the latest entertainment import from the West and that in itself made it welcome. Also, it was from Germany, a country from which Japan had received a number of ideas, models and products. In addition, a number of pre-*Caligari* expressionist German films had been popular in Japan. Novelist and film script writer Tanizaki Junichiro much liked the Paul Wegener

films, *The Student of Prague* (Der Student von Prag) and *The Golem* (Der Golem), shown in Japan in 1914 and 1916 respectively, and film director Kinugasa Teinosuke had seen a good many as well, having watched Murnau's *The Last Laugh*, (Der Letzte Mann, 1924) - his "ideal film." - five times.

Expressionism was seen in Tokyo, as elsewhere, as a reaction against realism. Extreme distortion was used to express an inner emotional reality rather than surface appearance. The writer - or painter, poet, composer - sought to avoid a representation of external reality and, instead, to project a highly personal vision of the world.

This went well with Japanese tastes. Realism had never been a theatrical aim. The Kabuki already had in its sets the large shapes of unshaded color now seen in expressionist works. Kabuki performances were also comparably distorted. Actors shouted, screamed, gestured broadly, and move in choreographed patterns through stylized sets. The goal of Japanese classic drama and German expressionist plays and films was similar - to express inner feelings in the most direct and vivid manner.

In expressionist films, the expressivity associated with the actor extended into every aspect of the filmed scene. Conrad Veidt, who appeared in *Caligari*, said that if the decor was conceived as having the same spiritual state as that which governed the character's mentality, the actor would find in that decor a valuable aid in composing and living his part. The same might have been said by any actor working in Japan's traditional theater.

A further reason for the welcoming of Expressionism in Japan during the first decades of the twentieth century was that there had long been a definite, if undefined, disinclination toward naturalism - that variety of realism which details all the appearances of daily life. Although Expressionism was considered avant-garde in other cultures, it found a ready home in mainstream Japan because there was a strong popular taste for formulaic treatments and the style of *Doctor Caligari* easily fitted into this.

In addition, imported Expressionism contained an urban bias which made it seem, in the eyes of the Japanese, truly modern. The works of early expressionism in Europe were set in the appalling megalopolis of industrial capitalism. Humans became cogs in this machine and under its asphalt lay destructive forces, ungovernable but tended by an authoritarian father figure against whom the son must revolt. Japan already had such a megalopolis in Tokyo and the rapid industrialization of the country was plainly leading to a serious economic depression. There were strikes, social unrest, and a pervasive if covert criticism of an overly paternalistic government.

Expressionism made criticism of social status easier to voice and the revolt against the father became a dominant theme, not only in such imported spectacles as *Metropolis* but in Murata Minoru's *Souls on the Road* (Rojo no Reikon, 1926) with its rebellious son and in many other films as well. Mizoguchi Kenji's early picture, *Blood and Spirit* (Chi to rei, 1923), about the masses downtrodden by authoritarian capitalism, although it has not survived, was said to have been noticeably expressionist. So was Murata's earlier *Eikichi, Chauffeur* (Untenshu Eikichi, 1924), with an added touch of class consciousness. Uchida Tomu, was another expressionist influenced director, particularly in his 1929 social satire *A Living Puppet* (Ikeru Ningyo) .

Expressionism as a style is seen in its fullest and most extreme Japanese form in two pictures by Kinugasa Teinosuke, later an academic director famous for *Gate of Hell* (1953). The first was *A Page Out of Order*, (Kurutta Ippeiiji, 1926, aka A Page of Madness, aka A Crazy Page). Made as a commercial film, and playing at a commercial theatre (though one reserved for showings of foreign film) it is - among other things - an illustration of how styles considered advanced or difficult in the West were readily accepted into the Japanese mainstream.

Mid-1920s Tokyo was characterized by a torrent of artistic ferment, much of it occasioned by literature and film from abroad. Miyoshi Masao has spoken of the wholesale interest in "bits and dollops of Paul Morand, Andrejev, Croce, Bergson, Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Symbolism, Structuralism, Realism, Strindberg, Swinburne, Hauptmann, Romain Rolland, Schnitzler, Lord Dunsany, Wilde, Lady Gregory, and a lot else."<sup>1</sup>

By 1925 a major literary school was the expressionist-like Shinkankakuha, or "Neo-Perceptionist School," a group which included the novelist Kawabata Yasunari who early pointed out that German Expressionism was the best vehicle for perceiving the primacy of subjectivity, as opposed to the realistic naturalist view. He compared the new German style to old Asian-style Buddhism, which had among its aims - as in Zen - the breaking down of subject and object. The subjective view of expressionism was, he thought, much like the preliminary stages of this breakdown.

Kinugasa agreed and it was decided that a self-consciously expressionist Japanese film should be attempted. Originally the director wanted it to be about a circus - like *Caligari*, a film he had not seen but which

---

<sup>1</sup> Miyoshi Masao, *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974.

Kawabata had. Later, scouting for ideas, he went to a mental hospital and discovered his subject.

This location appealed to the other Neo-Perceptionists - after all, *Caligari* had also taken place in a mental hospital and the hallucinations of an institutionalized patient would be an ideal vehicle for expressionist treatment. Apparently the entire group helped write the script, (certainly novelist Yokomitsu Riichi contributed its title) but Kawabata claimed it. Later he wrote a short story about the filming called “Warawanu Otoko” (translated as “The Unsmiling One”), and eventually included the script in his complete works.

The film is about a man who abandons his wife who as a consequence drowns her baby and goes insane. The older daughter holds her father responsible and he, feeling guilty, attempts to make amends by getting a job in the asylum where his wife is incarcerated. He has memories and hallucinations as does his unfortunate spouse and at the end, daughter’s marriage happily arranged, he stays on - now as much a part of the insane asylum as his wife is

More important than the story, however, is the atmosphere - something Japanese audiences quickly detect - in this case, the subjective experience of the asylum itself. This means that the narrative, what there is of it, is reassuringly atmospheric and at the same time can be made to take on a near allegorical importance.

As it is with these poor people, so it is with us - this is a part of the expressionist message. A man, a woman, a daughter - people in expressionist narratives have no names. We all live in an asylum for this is what the world is – this is the same explicit message as in *Caligari*.

Visually the film (photographed by Sugiyama Kohei, the cameraman who also went on to win Kinugasa his various prizes for *Gate of Hell*) owes much to German expressionist film: night-time lighting, lots of reflections, rain-soaked sets, shadows, urban menace. Kinugasa, in authentic expressionist style urged the inclusion of logically irrelevant but emotionally evocative scenes - a broken rice bowl, a rain-soaked cat - and so often interrupted the narrative that the audience had to bring its own subjectivity to assist in the interpretation. It is the story’s intent, for example, that one of the insane should “hear” music in a silent film. This is done by juxta-positioning musical instruments over her image, suggesting that her impressions should be ours and our experience of the asylum should be hers.

When the picture opened the press was attentive and respectful. Though not enough money was made to finance a second experimental film

(one of Kinugasa's stated ambitions), it was nonetheless thought of as a commercial film, if a rather advanced one. Also, it could be read in a manner which, no matter its pace or its demands upon attention, was one with which the audience was familiar - the primacy of expressed emotion, the validity of the subjective.

Kinugasa's second and last "expressionist" film, *Crossroads* (Jujiro, 1928), indicated how an imported style could be nationalized. The linkage between scenes is often, in the Japanese manner, neither logical nor causal but emotional. The woman is concerned with her brother's safety, so the director cuts directly to them much younger, in their childhood, to establish her memories, her concern. Often the cut is determined not by the convolutions of the story but by the visuals of the scene - the round shape of a sedge hat suggests the round shape of a teacup, for instance.

The expressionist intentions are mainly in the sets - huge, cavernous UFA-type settings, which recreate Japan's feudal era with lots of night, shadows, smoke and steam. The wounded hero, lost in the capital, wants water and crawls from his bedding only to find himself in a Fritz-Lang-like space with enormous casks half buried and full of water when he tries to drink. Pain becomes steam.

Films which expressionistically showed the menace of city life and the prevalence of insane asylums were, whether they intended it or not, were implicitly criticizing society. Since there is always much the matter with the status quo such criticism expresses popular aspirations and at the same time offends the authorities. This is no less true in Japan - perhaps even more so in Japan where the status quo has historically been less challenged.

Literature, drama, film, in the Taisho/Showa 1920s tended towards such a critique and the "bad" city remained a favorite theme. It is seen in films as otherwise disparate as Mizoguchi's *Tokyo March* (Tokyo Koshinkyoku, 1920) and Uchida's *Naked Town* (Hadaka no Machi, 1937). The trend has continued. Kurosawa Akira's post-war *Ikiru* (1953) is - on one level - about corrupt city government, and in Ozu Yasujiro's *Tokyo Story* (1953) it is the metropolis that rends the family.

Social criticism is at the core of Expressionism. Increasingly the Japanese government interpreted this as "leftist" (which it sometimes was) and regarded expressionist plays and films as politically suspicious. Though there was never anything like the purge which German Expressionism had to endure (being denounced by the National Socialists as "decadent") by the mid-1930s

the expressionist fashion had finally faded. It left behind, however, both an aura and a legacy – an enduring gift from Berlin to Tokyo.

### Bibliography

Berman, Russell A. *Cultural Studies of Modern Germany: History, Representation, and Nationhood*, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, 1993.

Raabe, Paul, ed., *The Era of German Expressionism*, Overlook Press, Woodstock, 1965.

Richie, Donald, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, Kodansha, International, Tokyo, 2001.

Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, McGraw-Hill Companies, New York Inc., 2003.