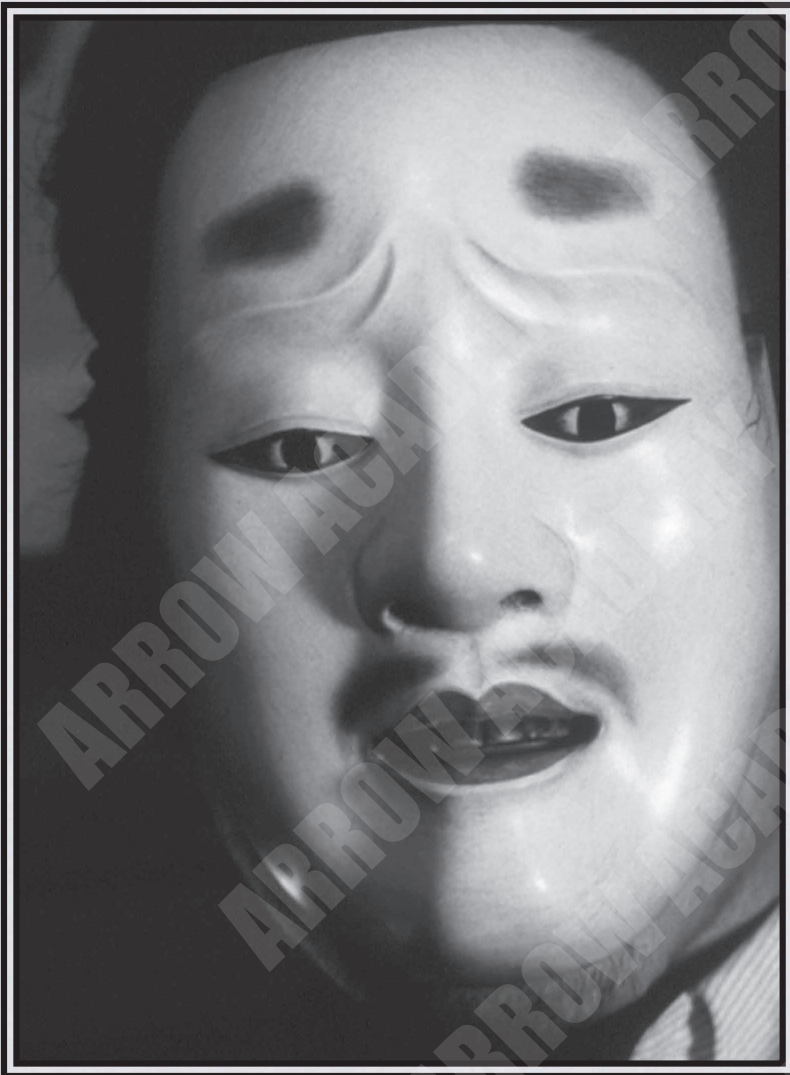


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THIS TRANSIENT LIFE

CAST

Kotobuki Hananomoto
Akiji Kobayashi
Eiji Okada
Kin Sugai
Ryô Tamura
Minor Terada
Michiko Tsukasa

CREW

Directed by **Akio Jissôji**
Written by **Toshirô Ishidô**
Cinematography **Yuzo Inagaki, Masao Nakabori** and **Kazumi Oneda**
Music by **Toru Fuyuki**
Edited by **Yoshihiro Yanagawa**
Produced by **Toyoaki Dan**



THIS TRANSIENT LIFE

by Tom Mes

Our canon of great Japanese films has been shaped to a large extent by film festivals, which, as scholar Markus Nornes notes, have long served as the main conduit between the Japanese film industry and its western audience. Many of the best-known films from Japan have been festival award-winners, including such monumental titles as Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954) and Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953), which both won the Silver Lion in Venice in their respective years.

Not every award winner, however, is automatically enshrined in the pantheon; some just seem to slip from our collective memory in spite of the highest accolades. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* (*Jigokumon*), which in 1954 won every major award imaginable, including the Palme d'or in Cannes, the Golden Leopard in Locarno, and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (as well as the Oscar for Costume Design, Colour). These days, if it is mentioned at all in English-language historiographies of Japanese cinema, *Gate of Hell* is seen as a middling film that briefly benefited from a western infatuation with all things Japanese and cinematic in the wake of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (Golden Lion in Venice, 1951), an unremarkable late entry in the filmography of a director whose zenith was the little-seen 1926 avant-garde silent *A Page of Madness* (*Kurutta ichipeji*).

A similar though arguably less deserved case of collective amnesia befell the 1970 winner of the Locarno Golden Leopard. In fact, since that win it has taken until the release of the box set you now hold in your hands for Akio Jissôji's *This Transient Life* (*Mujô*) to return into active circulation within the western world. The philosophically inclined might suggest that its title virtually invited a fame of only the most fleeting kind. And the film's fate is indeed an ironically appropriate illustration of the Buddhist concept which infuses it and forms its Japanese title: *mujô*, the universal truth of the impermanence of all things.

Making Waves

Yet, as is often the case with Japanese films, global prominence, or the lack thereof, is no indication of a movie's status back home. *This Transient Life* holds a nodal position in the history of the Art Theatre Guild (ATG) and the Japanese New Wave. ATG was the production/distribution outfit that was largely responsible for nurturing the New Wave from a Shochiku marketing gimmick into a national movement of independent filmmaking that, for close to two decades, traversed all boundaries in Japanese cinema that were previously held sacred: between studios and indies, between generations, and between genres and schools of filmmaking.



Contrary to the days of the studio system, which provided its omnipotent A-list directors with full means to make their films, creative freedom in Japanese cinema from the 1960s onward could only be guaranteed when risks were hedged and budgets remained low. Such a strategy formed the beating heart of ATG's long-term policies in favour of challenging cinema: the company always limited its involvement to fifty per cent of the budget of any given film, thus avoiding the hubris of "prestige pictures" that tends to bring down artistically ambitious independents.

Initially limited to a tiny handful of Tokyo theatres, ATG's distribution network expanded into Japan's wider theatrical circuit with *This Transient Life*, which thereby gave new and wider visibility to the post-studio era of Japanese film. The importance of ATG is, even today, underappreciated in our understanding of Japanese film history, largely due to the continuing dominance of an auteurist approach that favours coverage of individual filmmakers over an understanding of the industrial structures that allowed them to make their films in the first place. When we speak about the Japanese New Wave, we usually mention Nagisa Ôshima and Shohei Imamura, as well as Kijû Yoshida and Masahiro Shinoda. The well-informed may even bring up Toshio Matsumoto and Susumu Hani or point to the involvement of pink filmmaker Kôji Wakamatsu. But the one thing these directors have in common is that it was ATG which allowed them to continue working into the 1970s and in some cases beyond. Indeed, ATG was active well into the 1980s, helping to produce films by such luminaries of that decade as Juzo Itami (of *Tampopo* [1985] fame), Sogo Ishii (*Crazy Family/Gyakufunsha kazoku*, 1984) and Yoshimitsu Morita (*Family Game/Kazoku gêmu*, 1983). It was as a bulwark for the post-studio era New Wave, however, that ATG would most profoundly mark Japanese cinema.

Forbidden Desire

As scholars such as Inuhiko Yomota and Roland Domenig have pointed out, one of the main themes that ran throughout the films of the Japanese New Wave, particularly under ATG, was incest. Major films of the period, such as Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses* (*Bara no sôretsu*, 1969), Yoshida's *A Story Written in Water* (*Mizu de kakareta monogatari*, 1965) and *Heroic Purgatory* (*Rengoku eroica*, 1970), and Ôshima's *The Ceremony* (*Gishiki*, 1971) deal with this forbidden sexuality, albeit in more or less veiled terms, with incest serving mostly as a metaphor for patriarchy and the generation gap, and with a step-parent or in-law often providing a safe degree of separation from the genuinely illicit act. The predatory older women that populate the films of Shûji Terayama, for instance, are an obvious allusion to the overly possessive mother who would eventually come to play a more prominent role in such films as *Pastoral: To Die in the Country* (*Den-en ni shisu*, 1974) and *The Grass Labyrinth* (*Kusa meikyû*, 1979).

It has been noted more than once that the theme's predominance in the literature and other narrative forms of Japan reflects the history, both real and imagined, of the imperial family, going back to a creation myth in which the imperial lineage, as well as the islands that make up the archipelago, are the offspring of the incestuous couplings of the sibling ur-deities Izanagi and Izanami. In his 1974 ATG production *Himiko*, for example, Shinoda portrayed the titular, semi-mythical shaman queen of third-century Japan as being in an incestuous relationship with her brother.

Though today it has become the almost hackneyed stock-in-trade of erotic manga and idol dramas alike, it was *This Transient Life* that first placed the incest taboo at the centre of the narrative. The unbridled physical desire between brother Masao and sister Yuri, as expressed in a number of potent love scenes, even produces a child. The creation of this new life, however, goes hand in hand with the destruction of life elsewhere, with the suicide of Iwashita, the family's live-in houseboy whose quiet passion for Yuri we sense from the first time we see them on screen. (Masao may be the film's ostensible protagonist, but all action revolves around Yuri.)

For Jissôji, incest would become a recurring motif, one closely linked to his explorations of Buddhism and its degree of adequacy as a compass for human existence. Motivated by more than a hint of jealousy, not to mention sublimated self-loathing, the meddling Buddhist priest Ogino in *This Transient Life* treats Masao almost as a force of evil, a demon that needs exorcising, but the protagonist shrugs his shoulders and simply rejects family and religion alike as he continues to trace his own path through life, untethered by social mores, obligations or dogma. He is the embodiment of idiosyncrasy, constantly attracting yet always deflecting the ire of those more firmly implanted in society's web of restrictions.

That Jissôji is on the side of Masao's free-spiritedness seems readily apparent from his portrayals of the other two men who pine for Yuri's affection: Iwashita and Ogino. Their sexual frustration drives them both to voyeurism – through which they discover the incestuous coupling, an act that will lead Iwashita to his doom. While Ogino resorts to fondling statues of the merciful goddess Kannon ("How come all Buddhist statues look like women?", Masao asks him), Iwashita relieves himself by stabbing pictures of girls in nude magazines, notably one lady who is the spitting image of Yuri. Masao, meanwhile, spends his free time leafing through picture books on Buddhist sculpture. Some commentators have labelled Masao's interest in these effigies as "obsessive", but in relation to the fixations of Ogino and Iwashita, he comes across as by far the most mentally stable man among them – if not in the entire film.

Almost to emphasise this, one shot change, which comes immediately after Yuri has offered herself to Iwashita, seems for a moment to suggest that Masao is now spying on them. Instead it turns out he is entirely focused on carving his own Buddhist statue, as a marker of the event. "One can't become a Buddha, so one keeps making Buddhist sculptures," says Masao, who promptly departs to become apprentice to a sculptor – whose wife he just as promptly seduces.

While Masao may not form the personification of Buddhist ideals – at least not the ideals of Buddhism as an organised religion – at the same time his insistence on living entirely on his own terms is paradoxically very Zen-like. It represents existence in its purest form, of a kind that few of us can imagine for ourselves, let alone realise. He might be on his way to Buddhahood – or demonhood – after all.

Perhaps this is one reason why Jissôji's film focuses so intensely on textures, patterns and forms, from human skin to stone and wood – perspiring or weathered or moss-grown, they can endure in any shape or form, yet are inevitably bound to wither regardless of whether they have been



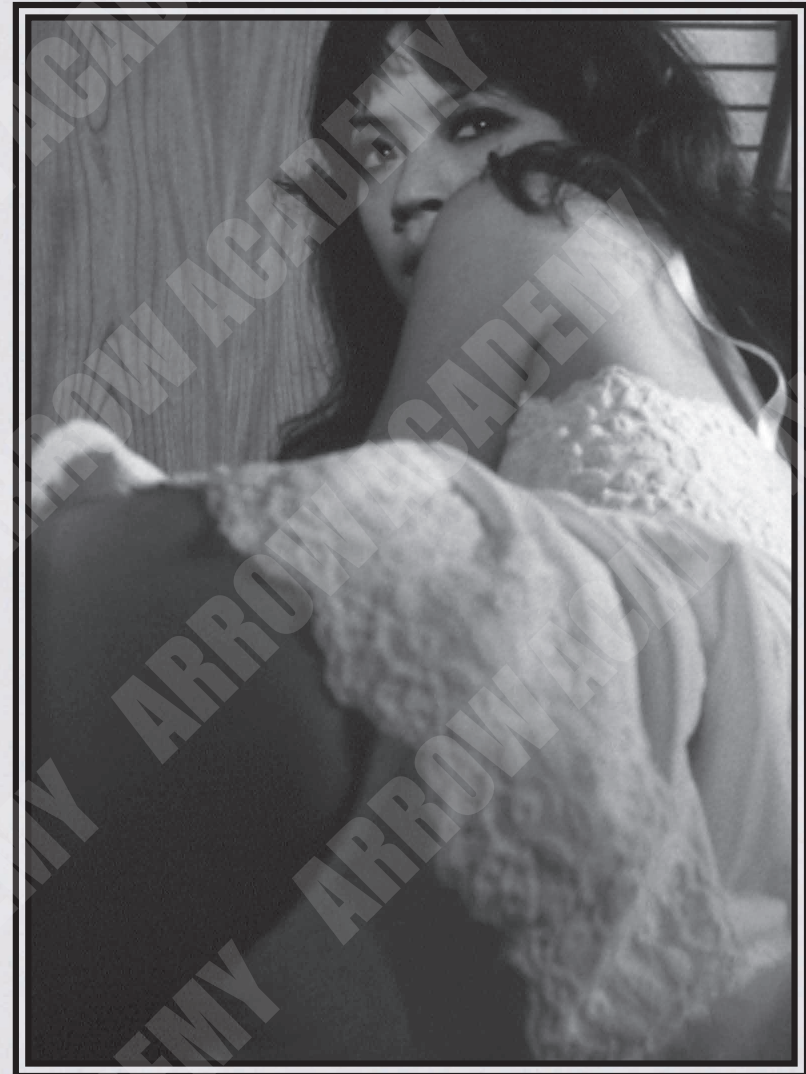
incorporated into an organising pattern, such as a temple pagoda, the statue of a divine being or a social construct such as a family or religion.

“Treasure Your Time”

Through the figures of Masao and Yuri, Jissôji’s film interprets the concept of *mujô* as a union of what Europeans have historically seen as a conflicting duality: *carpe diem* and *memento mori*. Life and death are serious matters, speaks one of the films’ intertitles drawn in calligraphy on raw wood, so treasure your time. While they make love, Masao sees flashes of a skeleton in place of his sister: in those brief instances, dry rigor mortis replaces vivacious flesh, but this only spurs him on to greater craving of Yuri’s warm body. A reminder of death is inherently also one of life. Death will inevitably come for them, but until then, Masao and Yuri treasure the time they have together. Death is a matter beyond their control – as are the mechanisms that will eventually lead to their separation. These issues matter not: their love and desire are above it all and will survive even them, taking the form of the child they have conceived.

Time waits for no one, as the film’s opening moments – and Jissôji’s enduring fascination with ticking clocks – remind us. Time has been merciful to *This Transient Life*, though. During the decades that we weren’t watching, it remained a mainstay of home video in Japan, from the VHS era through DVD, its continued availability firmly implanting it into the film discourse on its native soil, through generations of viewers, reviewers and historians. A milestone of Japanese cinema as it transitioned into a post-studio existence, *This Transient Life* has been called a masterpiece by more than one Japanese film scholar and historian. At last, our chance has now come to appreciate it once more. Time may wait for no one, but patience does sometimes pay off.

Tom Mes is the author of numerous books on Japanese film and the co-founder of Midnighteye.com. He teaches Japanese cinema at Leiden University in The Netherlands.





MANDALA

CAST

Shin Kishida
Kôji Shimizu
Hiroko Sakurai
Ryô Tamura

CREW

Directed by **Akio Jissôji**
Written by **Toshirô Ishidô**
Cinematography **Yuzo Inagaki**
Music by **Toru Fuyuki**





MANDALA

by Anton Bitel

A mandala – the item after which Akio Jissōji's *Mandala* (1971) is named – is a religious and spiritual object used in Hinduism and Buddhism to represent the entire universe in miniature: an iconic microcosm whose contemplation can induce enlightenment in the observer. It is also used as a representation of the Buddhist 'Pure Land', a kind of Utopian heaven liberated from *samsara*, the cyclical impermanence of everyday human experience.

Mandala is a difficult film. A fragmentary tale of the very different directions taken by two angry young men in their struggle to find, or change, their place in the world, it is full of jarring symbols, stilted dialogue, unapologetic misogyny and an endless array of alienation effects, challenging the viewer to keep up, or even at times just to keep watching. The reward, though, is a symmetrical nexus of ideas and associations interweaving religion, politics and anthropology to create an image of empty human strivings, of revolutionary ideals and of an ancient nation racing into modernity. What follows is a series of notes, trying to tease apart some of these different threads.

Eros in Waves

Mandala begins with sex literalised (Shinichi seen in flagrante with his friend Hiroshi's girlfriend Yasuko), and ends with sex's figuration (a train entering a tunnel). Now, in real life Jissōji was both a fervent train spotter and a devoted collector of model trains – but in his films like *This Transient Life* (*Mujō*, 1970) and *Mandala*, the speeding passage of trains is a symbol of transience. Likewise, key events in *Mandala* unfold, or have already unfolded, in liminal spaces: a pond near Shinichi's childhood home (now filled in and built over with new houses and a motel); the Kyoto university through which Shinichi and Hiroshi are passing on their way to adulthood (although Hiroshi's already short stay there has been further curtailed by his violent activities and associations); the peculiar seaside motel where Shinichi, Hiroshi and their respective girlfriends spend a brief, disappointing weekend swapping partners; the beach by the motel – its sands buffeted by waves and shifted by bulldozers – where both Shinichi and Hiroshi are violently lured to a cult in much the same way that fish are netted in the surf by the cult's leader, Maki; a fast-flowing waterfall, locus of both purity and pollution; and finally a different beach, serving as mysterious shoreline between the living and the dead. Jissōji's characters are constantly seeking a state (be it political, spiritual or atavistically nostalgic) of permanence in an impermanent world – and here even the most classically styled of ancient, ancestral abodes can be cleared out and burnt down in but a moment. *Mandala* is liminal and transitional in another sense too: it is the middle part in a film sequence – preceded by *This Transient Life* and followed by *Poem* (*Uta*, 1972), and made for the New Wave outfit Art Theatre Guild – all of which concern young men lost in changing times. It is Jissōji's first (mostly) colour feature, sandwiched between two in monochrome.



Yasuko's post-coital response to her fling with Shinichi – “This is meaningless” – is also the first, programmatic utterance in *Mandala*. That opening sex scene, shot softcore at various angles against a pure white wall and equally white bedsheets, is repeatedly intercut with a blank black screen suggestive of the void and death. Sex here is fleeting and unsatisfying – hence Shinichi's and Hiroshi's exploratory exchange of partners – offering fragmentary moments of ecstasy that do not last long, and that, at least in the brutalised Yasuko's case, leave a bitter aftertaste. The two young men want something both more meaningful and less ephemeral – and Shinichi will find it in the strange blend of erotics and primitivism offered by Maki's cult. Meanwhile the sound of waves outside, audible during that first scene of congress, is evocative not just of the Japanese New Wave in cinema which Jissōji, working here with writer Toshirō Ishidō (who had collaborated previously with New Wavers Nagisa Ōshima and Kijū Yoshida), is clearly surfing, but also of the endless, unstoppable tide of history lapping just outside the window.

Time, the Future, and the Living Dead

“I no longer believe in the future at all. I no longer think that a classless anti-State will come to pass.” So says Shinichi, one-time militant activist who dreamed of bringing about revolutionary change like the workers he so admired at the Parisian barricades of 1968. Now, though, he has retreated inwards from the world into a childhood memory of ecstatic timelessness which he is trying to recreate in Maki's rural cult. His desire both to “stop time” and to embrace death (or something like it) is also reflected in and symbolised by his necrophiliac tendencies, enacted when he has sex on the beach with the unconscious body of his girlfriend Yukiko. “He doesn't like any moving things.” Yukiko will later tell Maki, “To move is an act related to time. That's why he loves a still body, as well as a still sight.” Presumably Shinichi would be equally uneasy with the moving images of cinema, and Jissōji obliges by occasionally inserting a still into the action, a moment frozen in time, before events are swept along once more in the current of narrative. It is only in the repetitive rhythms of the cult's agrarian toil – and in its masked fertility rituals – that Shinichi can finally lose himself and deny both present and future. He is now obsessed, as he puts it himself, with “establishing a state in which I'm dead while alive.”

Much of *Mandala* hinges on the contrast between Shinichi and Hiroshi. Hiroshi, after all, is still very much committed to his Trotskyist principles of ‘permanent revolution’ (now rejected by Shinichi), even if his new-found commitment to a thorough-going individualism makes it impossible for him to be a member of any collective, whether his student political clubs or the Utopian cult's ‘primitive communism’. What is perhaps more striking, however, are certain similarities between Hiroshi and Shinichi. After all, Hiroshi has also abandoned university, and he also, in insisting that the pregnant Yasuko get an abortion, has turned his back on the future. (“It's foolish”, he says, “to make a baby and contribute to the multiplication of mankind.”) Unable to understand her place in Hiroshi's worldview, Yasuko declares, “It's as if I was one of the living dead,” unconsciously echoing Shinichi's own stated ideals. Both Shinichi and Hiroshi exist like zombies in a kind of limbo, uncertain how to live, or how to progress. When, in the final sequence, we see Hiroshi carrying a valuable Masatsune sword aboard a Super Express Train to Tokyo (on the “New Tōkaidō Line”), we too are left in limbo as to whether he is getting back on track with modern society, or intending to run it through on the blade of his newly purchased antique.

Revolution and Its Violation

Despite Shinichi and Hiroshi's different bids for timelessness, it is hard to think of a film more of its times than *Mandala* – an ambivalent investigation into the delusions and disillusionments of the post-'68 generation. Another, more troubling aspect of the film, however, similarly contemporary with the mores of Japanese cinema in the seventies and in particular with Jissōji's own oeuvre, is the recurrent fixation on rape – and rape always directed against women. Although Shinichi is ultimately drawn to the cult by an amalgam of personal and political ideas which seem to chime with its ethos, Maki's bizarre chosen method of recruiting newcomers is to send Shigeo and Mamoru to knock heterosexual couples out and then to violate sexually, one after the other, the unconscious, non-consenting women – and Maki expects the female cultists to prostitute themselves at the motel in often violent encounters, and the male cultists to abduct and rape other women. Indeed, Maki at times pontificates nostalgically about the compliance of women “in ancient times” when “a foolish act such as rape wouldn't have been possible”, even as he casually oversees forceful assaults on the women of his own time.

All this might be regarded as Jissōji's way of exposing the cult's unspeakable dark side, except that both Shinichi – not just after he joins the cult, but also before – and Hiroshi commit their own acts of rape, as well as treating their respective girlfriends with casual contempt. Although everything in *Mandala* is presented in a heavily fragmented form, most of today's viewers will struggle to separate this unpalatable part of the film from its political, philosophical and theological content. Rape sullies everything here, and adds, in a not entirely welcome way, to the challenges of viewing. Perhaps one might, generously, interpret all this rape as representing the corruption of ideals in a corrupted world – but it is also deeply, undeniably uncomfortable.

The Dialectic of Alienation

“The true source of that ecstasy doesn't lie in the lascivious poses of a woman,” says Maki of his wife as she writhes on the floor, supposedly being taken sexually by silent gods. “It's truly erotic because there is no word contained therein.”

In saying this, Maki is also setting out in clear terms why *Mandala* itself is less an erotic film per se than a film about eros and the drives of desire. For Ishidō's screenplay is replete with the spoken word, whether in the conversations between Shinichi and Yukiko, Hiroshi and Yasuko, Shinichi and Maki or – pivotally – in the verbal clash of world views between former friends Shinichi and Hiroshi. If none of these dialogues feels particularly dynamic, that is perhaps because they are discourses of alienation, taking place in a sort of social void where there is no meeting of minds. “I become alienated from myself,” Shinichi tells Yukiko in their motel room, while the camera frames him in isolation, turned to face the wall rather than his girlfriend. Similarly, when Hiroshi and Yasuko discuss her pregnancy in front of a *karesansui* or Japanese rock garden (itself a form of balanced, contemplative mandala), the distance between them – and their relative orientation – keep shifting irrationally from one cut to the next. In fact, *Mandala* offers a heady kaleidoscope of New Wave effects, from canted angles to jump cuts, and from the distortions of a fisheye lens to the confusion of seeing intimate moments both on the big screen and on a small black-and-white television set



that Maki and his spying associates monitor. All these alienation devices, seemingly designed to capture the disconnection between the characters while further disaffecting the viewer, culminate in the film's second half, where Maki's regressive world is presented – much like Shinichi's memories of his childhood – in black and white, so that the film constantly, disconcertingly swings from monochrome to colour as Shinichi and Hiroshi come into dialectic collision from their now profoundly incompatible perspectives.

Such diametric oppositions are present not just in choices of framing and editing, but also in *Mandala's* thematic furnishings. The 'recently built' Motel Barocco, e.g., in which the film opens is a concrete modernist edifice whose oddly angled rooms and corridors suggest an expressionist nightmare, whereas Maki's other property – the calming compound of his cult in the countryside – is built from wood in an older, more conventional mode of Japanese architecture, and features its own internal *kaensansui* (as well as a Japanese flag shown slipping from the wall at politically strategic moments). There is a similar contrast between the modern clothes worn by the students, and the traditional kimono and white makeup sported by Maki's wife. The cult's improbable combination of communism and religion is another koan-like paradox, merging elements normally considered irreconcilable. Meanwhile Maki's henchmen/lovers Shigeo and Mamoru, seen earlier wrestling each other sumo-style on the beach, later shadowbox in strictly solo wrestling 'matches' at a harvest feast day, as a sign of the collective fantasy, even the solipsism, which has taken over the insular cult. The solo sex acts of Maki's wife, supposedly undertaken with the gods although it is not even clear that Maki believes this, represent a similar shift into madness and isolation.

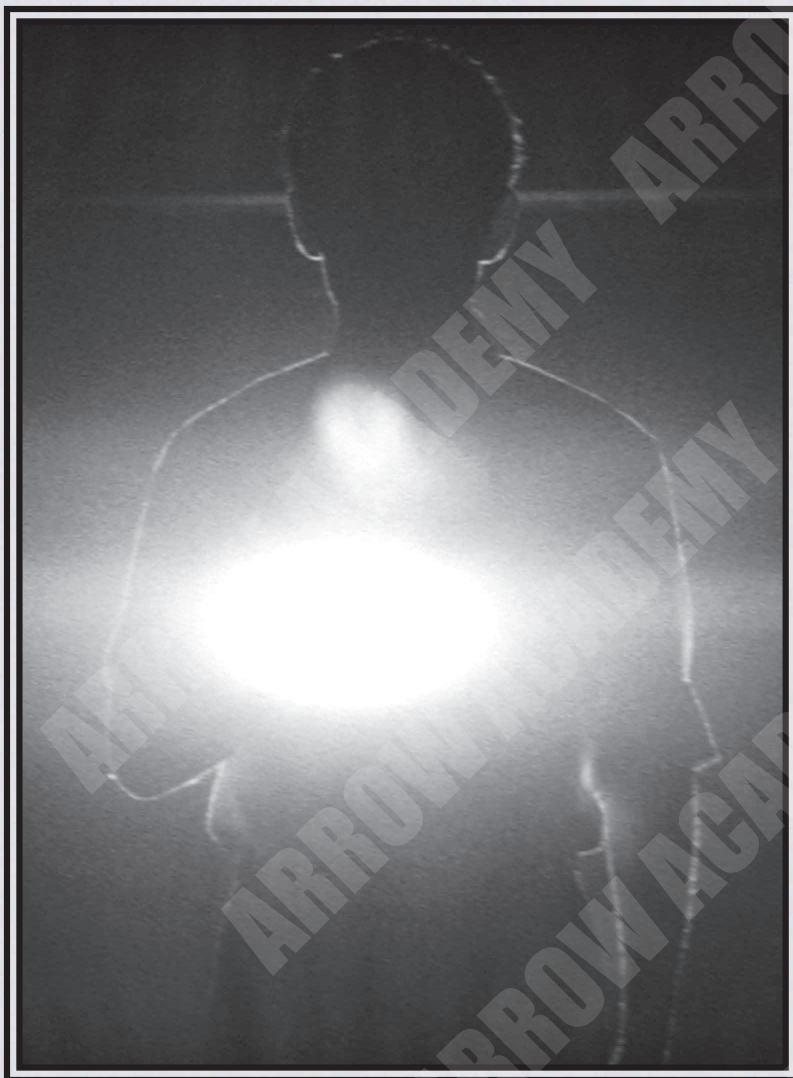
The Meaningless Divine

Mandala ends with Hiroshi, its most secular character, riding into an uncertain future while a voice sings the 25th Chapter of the Lotus Sutra, concerning Kannon, the Buddha of Compassion, who helps those who call upon him. This is another paradox – a clash of faith and faithlessness – but as Maki had put it, "The true god will never speak. The words of the true god may be like an echo, spreading through the vast void. It must be beyond our comprehension. Whether you're an atheist or not is irrelevant to that echo." The divine is a present absence here, re-echoing from the film's 'meaningless' contrasts and contradictions, and lent implicit shape by the mandala-like symmetry of their opposition.

Anton Bitel is a freelance film critic specialising in horror and Asian cinema. He blogs at projectedfigures.com.







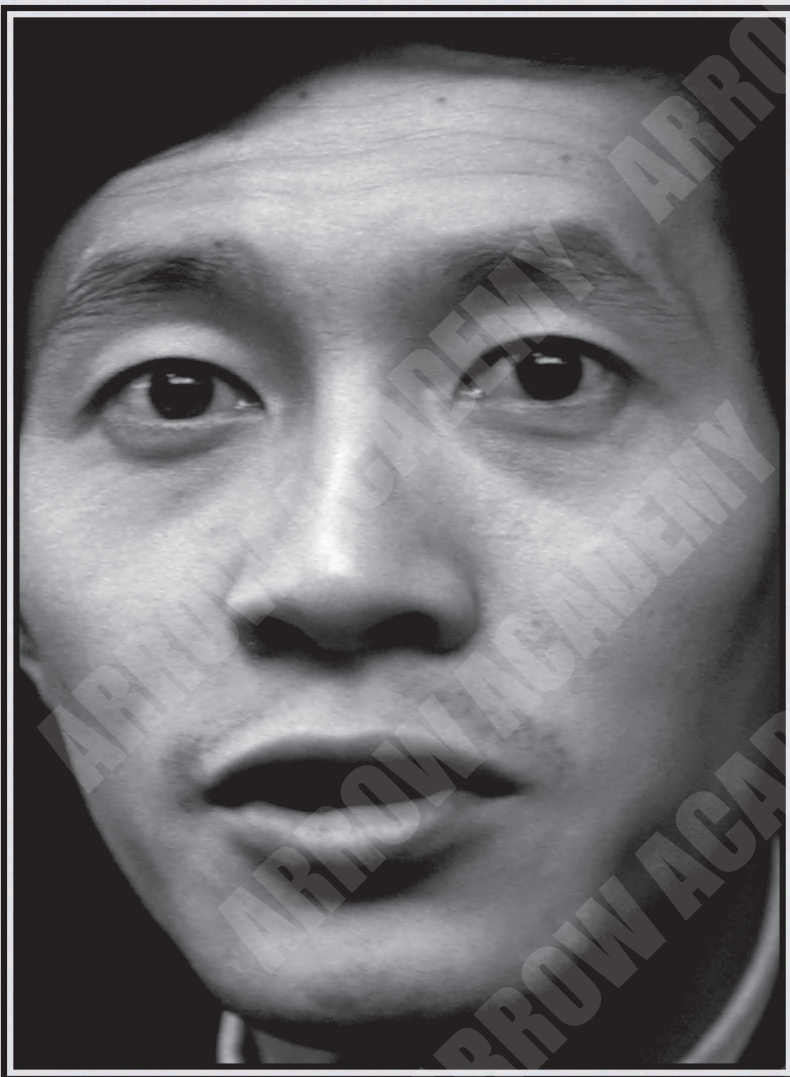
POEM

CAST

Shin Kishida
Hiroko Sakurai
Saburô Shinoda
Ryô Tamura
Eiko Yanami

CREW

Directed by **Akio Jissôji**
Written by **Toshirô Ishidô**
Cinematography **Masao Nakabori**
Music by **Toru Fuyuki**
Edited by **Keiichi Uraoka**
Produced by **Kinshirô Kuzui** and **Akira Tojo**



POEM

by Espen Bale

It would be understandable, having watched *This Transient Life* (*Mujō*, 1970) and *Mandala* (*Mandala*, 1971), to assume that *Poem* (*Uta*, 1972) would continue the trend in aesthetics and tone, if not necessarily the content, of the previous films. Regular Akio Jissōji collaborator Masao Nakabori¹ handled the photography, returning after collaborating on *This Transient Life* with Yuzo Inagaki (who also photographed *Mandala*) and Kazumi Oneda; Toshirō Ishidō² and Toru Fuyuki again wrote the script and provided music respectively. Similarly, the extra-diegetic music is overwhelmingly western classical (in this case, Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*) and the film continues the trilogy's preoccupation with the nature of existence, specifically in relation to Buddhist teaching and culture. Many of the cast will also be familiar, Shin Kishida (Yasushi Moriyama), Hiroko Sakurai (Fujino) and Ryō Tamura (Wada) all return, joined here by Saburō Shinoda (Yasuzo Masumura's *Red Angel* [*Akai tenshi*, 1966]; Kon Ichikawa's *I Am a Cat* [*Wagahai wa neko de aru*, 1975]; TV's *Ultraman Tarō* [1973]) as Jun, the houseboy, and Eiko Yanami (a regular in Daiei's *Kōkōsei banchō* series; later appearing in *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Jailhouse 41* [*Joshū sasori: Dai-41 zakkyo-bō*, 1972]) playing Natsuko, Yasushi's wife. However, the final film in Jissōji's *Buddhist Trilogy* is a different proposition from the preceding films. Tonally and aesthetically, it feels more akin to Shōhei Imamura's later Nikkatsu films, this 'return' to an earlier aesthetic perhaps reflecting the Buddhist ideas of non-linearity and the cyclical nature of time within the trilogy's structure.

Despite the visual and tonal similarities between *Poem* and other Japanese 'New Wave' work of the '60s, Jissōji eschews the philosophical underpinnings of his contemporaries. Imamura's innate, primal 'Japanese-ness', Nagisa Ōshima's own complex form of Marxist class-struggle and Kijū Yoshida and Hiroshi Teshigahara's western existentialism all served to radically question the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of post-war Japanese society, but none of these filmmakers seem to probe the very nature of existence as intently and aggressively as Jissōji does in these films. The first two films in the trilogy often feature flowing, subjective camerawork, evoking Buddhism's animist philosophy, imbuing inanimate objects with a spiritual presence and in *This Transient Life* and particularly *Mandala*, there are sequences in which the placing and movement of the camera, as well as the lenses used, suggest a sentient, but not human, subjectivity – as if the wind, the sand and the trees are spectators.

1 - Nakabori would later work on Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Maborosi* (1995) and Kijū Yoshida's *Women in the Mirror* (*Kagami no onnatachi*, 2002), as well as collaborating with SABU (Tanaka Hiroyuki) on *The Blessing Bell* (*Kōfuku no kane*, 2002) and *Dead Run* (*Shissō*, 2005).

2 - Ishidō was something of a major player in the so-called Japanese New Wave, working with Nagisa Ōshima on *Cruel Story of Youth* (*Seishun zankoku monogatari*), *The Sun's Burial* (*Taiyō no hakaba*) and *Night and Fog in Japan* (*Nihon no yoru to kiri*, all 1960), *The Catch* (*Shiiku*, 1961) and *The Rebel* (*Amakusa Shirō Tokisada*, 1962); with Kijū Yoshida on *A Story Written with Water* (*Mizu de kakareta monogatari*, 1965), *Woman of the Lake* (*Onna no mizūmi*, 1966) and *Affair in the Snow* (*Jūhyō no yoromeki*, 1968), as well as scripting Jūrō Kara's ATG production of *Sea of Genkai* (*Genkai-nada*, 1976), Shōhei Imamura's *Black Rain* (*Kuroi ame*, 1989) and numerous episodes of *Ultraman* (1966-67).



Alongside this animist aesthetic are references to Nô theatre and depictions of *jigoku-e* (hell pictures) in *This Transient Life* and *Mandala* respectively, references that develop throughout the trilogy to become a serious contemplation of the relationship between Buddhist thought, action and art. As the design of the opening titles suggests, calligraphy plays an important role in *Poem*. Long considered the most important traditional art form in East Asia, calligraphy, due in part to its directness in translating thought and feeling, also holds particular importance in Zen Buddhist artistic practices.³ Calligraphy, alongside serving the Moriyama family, is Jun's *ikigai*, his *raison d'être*. Outside of his strictly delineated work routine, much of his time is spent practicing calligraphy – taking rubbings, visiting gravestones and writing *kanji*.⁴ His belief that the look and feel of characters is most important, rather than their technical perfection, as well as the devotion given to the art form, strongly suggests a religious, philosophical approach to calligraphy, rather than a practical one. During the first night sequence, with Jun on his regular 'patrol', the light emanating from Jun's torch and the moon recalls a Gothic horror. At several points the torch approaches the camera producing an almost entirely white screen. This then cuts to a darkened image and the whole sequence consists of an ebb and flow of blacker and whiter images. Jissôji here reduces film to its fundamental parts – light and its absence, evoking an inverted calligraphy, where the flows of light are the new brushwork.

During these patrols, it becomes clear that Jun is perhaps less vigilant than first appeared. As detailed in a scene in which he should be able to spot the house's other occupants through a window, he fails to do so, as if in a trance. The use of the torchlight is not systematic, but almost artistic – the light dancing across surfaces. Jun is not so much examining the building for dangers but examining the materiality of his surroundings to explore the limits of his own subjectivity. Much like the texture of calligraphy paper, the dark spaces that Jun explores are not strictly 'blank'. Rather than representing *mu* or 'nothingness', these spaces are *ma*, which has not only objective, but subjective, relational qualities.⁵ Unlike western philosophical trends, where time and space tend to be treated separately, *ma* is temporal and spatial and whilst the difference between *Poem's* treatment of cinematic space and that of the preceding films is notable (*Mandala's* aesthetic can be seen as an extension of *This Transient Life's*), they are united in the extra-diegetic use of the sound of a ticking clock. First used within the confines of the family home in *This Transient Life*, it occurs throughout all three films, explicitly drawing our attention to the temporality of cinema, as much as the spatial aesthetic dimension(s). Incidentally, this fascination with time is one he shares with Shûji Terayama, but whilst the latter's interest is predominantly synchronic – an anarchistic desire to liberate language, culture and society from a past we cannot 'return' to,⁶ Jissôji takes a more diachronic approach, urging us to consider the 'present' within the realms of time. The most explicit focus on the term *ma* is during Toru's pornographic session, where the flashing bulb helps, rather than hinders, the creation of images and meanings. We know that the images do not cease when the light is off, but Jissôji seems to be inviting us to examine the spaces when we cannot see, urging us to consider the relationship between 'negative space' and light and between viewer and image.

3 - Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History Volume 2: Japan* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005) p. 233

4 - Characters adopted from China that are used, alongside two phonetic alphabets, to write the Japanese language. Each character has a meaning or meanings as well as one, often two, sometimes numerous readings and shadings of meaning depending on the context.

5 - For an introduction to the concept of *ma* and its role in religious aesthetics see Richard B. Pilgrim, 'Intervals (Ma) in Space and Time: Relations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan' in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. by Charles Wei-hsun Fu & Steven Heine, (SUNY Press, 1995).

6 - Steven C. Ridgely, *Japanese Counter Culture: The Antiestablishment Art of Terayama Shûji* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) p. XVI

Further linking all three films are depictions of Buddhist hells. *Samsara*, or to use its Japanese name, *rinne*, is the endless cycle of existence, punctuated by re-births in one of six realms, with three 'hellish' realms. *The Buddhist Trilogy* offers visions of each: *This Transient Life*, with its lust, casual sex and destructive sexuality depicts the beast, or animal realm,⁷ with *Mandala's* hellish depictions of sexual violence, torture, suicide and endless suffering evoking *naraka*, or hell. The middle of these 'hellish' realms is that of the *preta* (known in Japanese as *gaki*), ghoulish figures that prowl the land (often barely discernible to the human eye) consumed by extreme thirst and hunger. In the final act of the film, Jun is reduced into such a state by the actions of Toru, who demands he never eat again in order to be allowed to remain in the Moriyama house, thus joining *This Transient Life's* bestial, incestuous anarchism and *Mandala's* hellish sexual exploitation and violence to complete the triptych.

Politically speaking, rather than a materialist temporality, Jissôji's films focuses almost exclusively on a spiritual and philosophical history, with *Mandala's* denouement providing one example of where the trilogy actively engages with the violent politics of the time. By 1972, the year of *Poem's* release, the radical left in Japan (glimpsed briefly in *Mandala*) was almost spent. The previous year the remnants of the United Red Army (*Rengô sekigun*) had been arrested after a lengthy hostage situation and a ten-hour siege that left two policemen dead. Although the brutal and hellish revelations as to the events within the group would only emerge in the months and years after the group's dissolution, it is possible to read the destructive events of *Mandala* as an attempt to understand these actions.

In the final moments of *Mandala*, Shinichi (Tamura) purchases a *katana* and boards a *shinkansen* to Tokyo. Inserted into this procession of images are shots of the National Diet Building, the seat of the Japanese government. It is therefore strongly suggested that he will carry out an attack that will dwarf the bombing he claimed to have planned earlier.⁸ The decade preceding the trilogy had been bookended by two of the most infamous acts of Japanese right-wing violence of the time – the on-air assassination of Japan Socialist Party Chairman Inejirô Asanuma in October 1960 and the attempted coup and *seppuku* of Yukio Mishima in November 1970. Both these acts were carried out using traditional Japanese blades (the Left and Right of this period were keenly aware of the political-historical connotations of such weapons – the Left tending to favour bombs, guns and the common *geba-bô*), and it is pertinent to suggest a right-wing motivation to *Mandala's* finale. Before boarding the train, whilst Shinichi browses the book shop, the camera pans to reveal a wall and table devoted to selling copies of *Ba-ra-kei: Ordeal by Roses*, the 1968 collaboration between Mishima and photographer Eikoh Hosoe (this is likely to be the 1971 re-edit, of which Tadanori Yokoo was also an author), and so this brief image, in which ephemera becomes text, would, alongside the sword, surely have very strong political connotations for any Japanese audience at the time of the film's release.

7 - The incestuous relations in the film are even referred to as 'bestial' by the priest, Ogino.

8 - The combination of weapon and intended target strongly reference the *Ni ni roku jiken*, or February 26th Incident, an attempted coup carried out by officers belonging to the Army's *Kôdôta*, or Imperial Way Faction in 1936. The event is referenced in both Mishima's 1961 novel and 1966 film *Patriotism* (Yûkoku), Seijun Suzuki's *Fighting Elegy* (*Kenka ereji*, 1966) and Kijû Yoshida's *Coup d'état* (*Kaigenrei*, 1973).

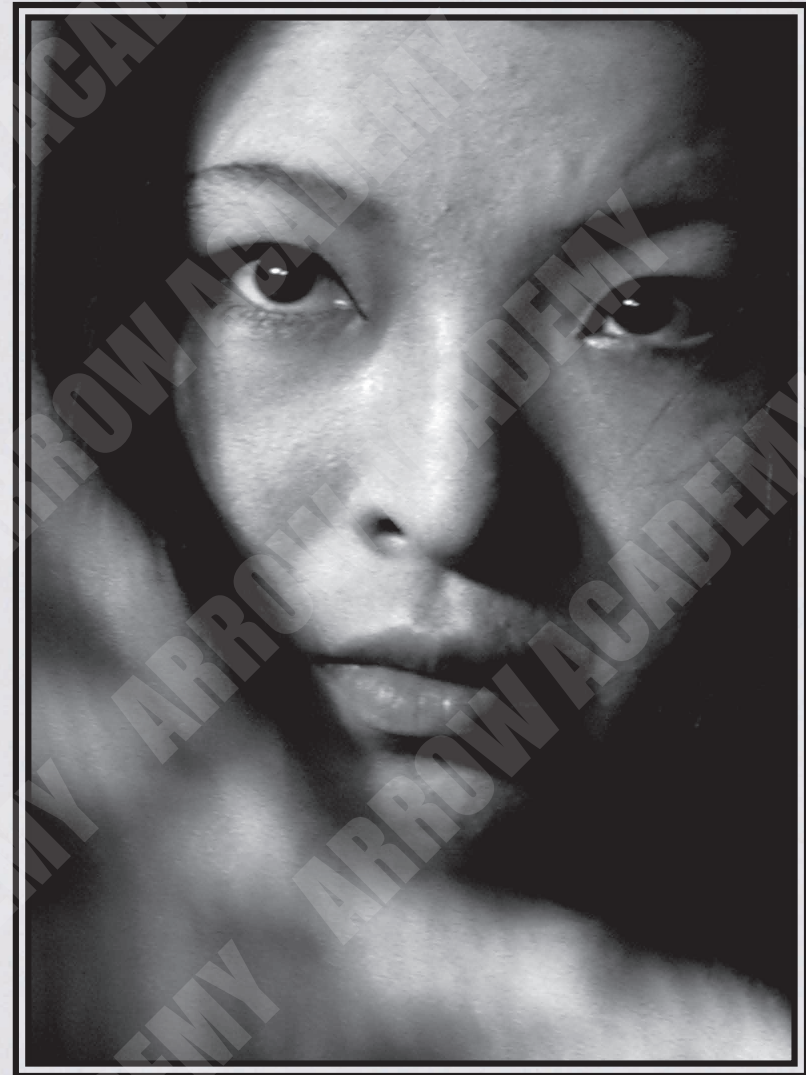


This brief evocation of Mishima also indicates the culmination of one form of nihilism in these films and the adoption of another. If Mishima's transition from a man of words to a man of action when he adopted, in Nietzschean terms, an 'active nihilism', is resembled in the will-to-power of Masao when he followed his incestuous desires and Shinichi his desire for political change through violence, then Jun in *Poem* is primarily an example of 'passive' or 'Buddhist' nihilism,⁹ but a movement to action does occur in the final act. His repeated desire to assist only those of the Moriyama family, his asceticism and his devotion to the preservation of the Moriyama forests strongly supports a nationalistic reading of the character, but one that is complicated in the film's final act. As it becomes clear that Yasushi, Natsuko and Toru wish to sell the family land for development, only Jun opposes this decision. Jun's evocation of sun imagery towards the end also lends a credence to such a reading of his character, and, much like Mishima's stand against the Americanisation of Japan and a rejection of the Showa Emperor, Jun here attempts to overturn his passivity and to become a man of action, to guard against the corruption of Japan, even if it means acting against the wishes of his so-called superiors.

Poem's final scene appears to mirror that of *This Transient Life*, but whereas the latter's vision of mother and child suggested a new beginning, new life, the final scene of the trilogy is one of violence and futility. Jun is exhausted, defeated – physically and spiritually – and Jissōji lingers on his final moments, drawing us through the ringer too. However, this final scene can be read one of two ways. On the one hand, whilst this is an image of despair, the use of Vivaldi's 'Spring' suggests a renewal, a rebirth – returning to the *samsara*, Jun is leaving this realm, and entering a new one. If, through the course of the trilogy, we have descended into the pits of hell, then the triptych's final act is one of hope – Jun may be dead, but he, like us one day, will be reborn. Or, on the other hand, we can embrace the incongruity of the score and revel in its irony – this explosion of passion, joy and new life, contrasting bittersweetly with the agonising pains of a dying young man. After all that has gone before, Jissōji appears to mock us, to ask us humorously, yet seriously, where in all this do we stand?

The BFI National Archive's Espen Bale is a researcher and specialist in Japanese avant-garde cinema.

9 - Roy Starrs, *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994) p. 41







AKIO JISSÔJI, SACRED AND PROFANE

by Tom Mes

The regularity with which we have lately been rediscovering long-overlooked Japanese filmmakers is both a testament to the country's vast and rich cinematic output and the inevitable result of previous approaches to canonising cinema from Japan. Much of the history of western writing on Japanese film consists of attempts at separating wheat from chaff: that which was deemed high art was singled out for praise, analysis and a place in the history books, while anything deemed of lesser value was, for many decades, blithely ignored.

To a large extent this was an enduring legacy of the early 1960s, when a number of western – specifically American – film scholars felt an urgent need to create an independent academic discipline of Film Studies. What we now take for granted, if not treat as passé, once required a struggle to wrench free from the Literary Studies from whence it sprung. In order to emancipate itself, Film Studies paradoxically yet shrewdly mimicked the rhetoric of its parent: by proclaiming film an art form, pronouncing great filmmakers auteurs and starting construction on a canon of great works, the fledgling discipline was able to demonstrate its pertinence, swiftly bolstered by a rapid influx of students who were bowled over by the new international art cinema from such places as France, Sweden, Italy and other further-flung locales.

Among these, Japanese cinema played an especially important role in this process, as the nation's films and filmmakers were then coming off a decade that saw them win every major film award imaginable. Indeed, during the 1950s nary a year went by in which Japanese films didn't receive awards – kicking off with *Rashomon's* epoch-making win at the Venice film festival in 1951 and growing into a tidal wave of now-iconic films including (but not limited to) Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku ichidai onna*, 1952), *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sanshō dayū*, 1954), Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954) and *The Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi-toride no san-akunin*, 1958), Hiroshi Inagaki's *Musashi Miyamoto* (1954), and Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp* (*Biruma no tategoto*, 1956). The list of Japanese films that won major prizes at all the leading European festivals during this time reads like a bullet-point digest of the officially sanctioned history of Japanese cinema, with only Yasujiro Ozu still a notable absentee. (Ozu's films, so beloved by his employer Shochiku, were far too Japanese for western viewers to understand. It would take another decade of Donald Richie's badgering for them to finally allow Ozu's work to be shown abroad.)

All this goes to show that what we call a history of Japanese cinema is also a chronicle of the needs and interests of those who wrote it and who decided what was allowed in and what was left out. By



rights, this officially sanctioned history has done far more to obscure the real history of Japanese cinema (and of its international distribution) than to illuminate it. In their eagerness to legitimise their quest for independence, film scholars drew up walls where none had existed before – walls that we are still in the process of tearing down today. The idea that great films could also be popular was never doubted, but the reverse had not yet occurred to anyone – at least not willingly. After a select company of ‘humanist masters’ from the ‘Golden Age’ had been ceremoniously enshrined, it was the ‘New Wave’ that was singled out for praise. A group of politically committed and stylistically innovative artists operating independently from the major studios formed just the right proxy for a community of young and dynamic film scholars eager to dust off the academe.

But the New Wave was itself a far more protean thing than its accepted image of a radical and intellectually self-conscious art cinema would (or could) let on. Looking at the output of the Art Theatre Guild, the production-distribution outfit that effectively functioned as the hub for New Wave filmmaking between the 1960s and the mid-1980s, the movement incorporated filmmakers ranging from documentarians to yakuza specialists, and films that varied from the staunchly political to the whimsically supernatural. Even if one were to stay loyal to the commonly held notion that Nagisa Ōshima was the inspirational linchpin at the New Wave’s core, then by way of his many collaborative projects the movement would include directors of softcore pornography and of TV superhero serials.

One of these directors was Akio Jissōji, who debuted in television for Radio Tokyo (later TBS) in 1961. He spent several years directing episodes of that perennial children’s favourite, *Ultraman* (1966-67), before setting up his own production company and making his first theatrically released film *When Twilight Draws Near* (*Yoiyami semareba*), a 44-minute short feature based on Nagisa Ōshima’s script and released by ATG in May 1969, as a double bill with Ōshima’s *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (*Shinjuku dorobō nikkō*).

While the step from making small-screen superhero shows to the beating heart of 1960s art cinema and counterculture may seem like a giant leap indeed, Jissōji had already made a name for himself with his intelligent and idiosyncratic approach to his television works. As early as 1962, Jissōji had invited Ōshima, whose debut film *A Town of Love and Hope* (*Ai to kibō no machi*, 1959) he greatly admired, to write the teleplay for an episode of the drama series *Mother* (*Okaasan*). *Ultraman*, about a shape-shifting superhero defending Earth from monstrous invaders, may have been the special-effects playground of Eiji Tsuburaya, the famed designer of Godzilla and his many *kaiju* pals, but its monster-of-the-week format allowed its makers a surprising degree of creative leeway in terms of the monsters’ actual methods of taking over our world. Jissōji would have them exploring this planet by taking tea in the tatami-matted interior of an average Japanese home or roving the leafy backstreets of Tokyo’s residential areas in cinéma vérité style.

Jissōji’s novel approaches would impress many in the film industry. His later regular set designer Noriyoshi Ikeya, who would also work on Seijun Suzuki’s sumptuously stylised *Taisho Trilogy* (1980-91), remembered his first exposure to the Jissōji method fondly:

“I was a big fan of French film at the time, the Nouvelle Vague, Godard and so on. I imagined myself making those kinds of films, so when my friend asked me to join Tsuburaya Productions, I was a bit hesitant at first. The prospect of making monster movies didn’t strike me as being particularly appealing. Then he showed me an episode of *Ultraman* and I was really impressed. In fact, I thought that with talent like that, we could make better films than the French. And that episode was directed by Akio Jissōji.”

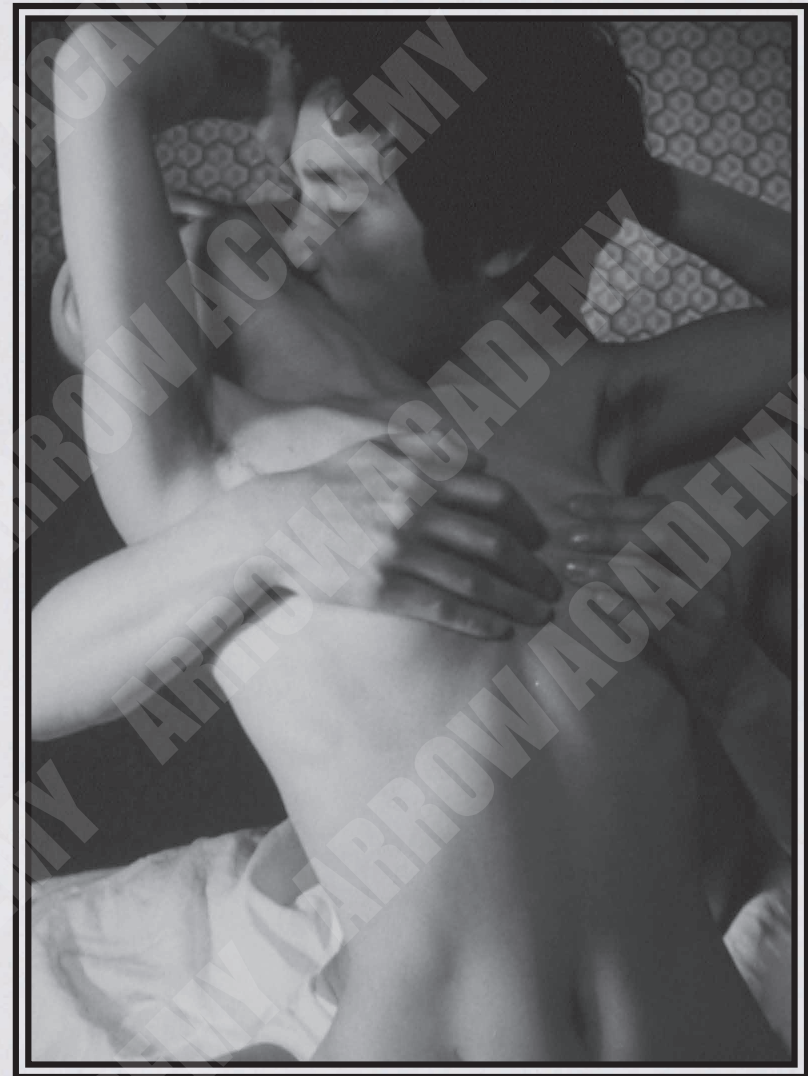
That same love of French cinema would create an instant bond between the two men, who would remain close collaborators to the very end of Jissōji’s life. As a student of French literature at Tokyo’s prestigious Waseda University in the late 1950s, Jissōji had written and published numerous essays on French cinema, and while he never actually visited the country in his lifetime, Jissōji reportedly knew the way around Paris by heart from studying maps, books and films.

Jissōji’s initial excursion into theatrical filmmaking was swiftly followed by what would become the *Buddhist Trilogy*, all released by ATG. The religious aspect was never far from any work Jissōji made, though, including the television productions he continued to deliver throughout the 1970s, culminating in a theatrically released *Akio Jissōji’s Ultraman* (*Jissōji Akio kantoku sakuhin Urutoraman*) in 1979. As the scion of a family of Buddhist priests, his body of work is marked out by a constant search for the transcendental in the corporeal activities of human life, sex most notably among them. The trilogy forms perhaps the most overt exploration of such a symbiosis, however in his later works Jissōji often also burrowed deep into the darker facets of human desire and sexuality, notably through adaptations of works by the Marquis de Sade (*Vice and Virtue* [*Akutoku no sakae*, 1988]) and Edogawa Rampo (*The Watcher in the Attic* [*Yaneura no sanposha*, 1992]; *Murder on D-Hill* [*D-zaka no satsujin jiken*, 1998]; *Rampo Noir* [*Rampo jigoku*, 2005]), as well as with a trio of early-1990s low-budget titles made for the rental video market, in which he pursued the narrative and thematic possibilities of depicting actual sex acts without resorting to hardcore explicitness.

The supernatural also remained a constant motif, reaching mythical proportions in, for example, *Tokyo: The Last Megalopolis* (*Teito monogatari*, 1988), an epic blockbuster that revolves around ancient practices of geomancy and occult beliefs, but applied to the history of early 20th-century Tokyo. The film reimagines every major event that befell the capital during this period, such as the devastating 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, as the work of the vengeful spirit of an immortal sorcerer, who has taken the bodily form of a right-wing military ideologue. Featuring monster design by H.R. Giger, the film became a box office smash and has subsequently grown into a cult film. Like the *Buddhist Trilogy*, *Tokyo: The Last Megalopolis* features the theme of incest as a not just transgressive but transcendent act that, for better or worse, can produce the seed of contact between the earthly and the spiritual realm.



Regardless of the seeming disparity between the individual films, Jissôji's oeuvre consistently seeks out a balance between the sacred and the profane. The Japanese film scholar Roland Domenig made a valid point when he argued that Jissôji is the true Asian equivalent to Europe's monumental Christian filmmakers Carl Theodor Dreyer and Robert Bresson – rather than Ozu, as Paul Schrader famously suggested in his 1972 study *Transcendental Style in Film*. We can only grasp this importance, however, when we tear down the needless walls that have been constructed to separate so-called art films from supposedly lowbrow commercial genre productions, not to mention the silver screen from video and television. To recalibrate our image of Japanese cinema, Jissôji is just the filmmaker we need.





ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

The films in this box-set are presented in their original aspect ratios and with original mono sound. The masters were provided by Toho, with additional grading work carried out by R3Store.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield

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Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

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