**- Contemporary Japanese Cinema -**

**Takeshi Kitano & Kiyoshi Kurosawa**

With such an expansive history from ancient feudal Japanese tradition to today’s modern technocracy, Japan has one of the most diverse cultural histories in human history. This rich background cemented deep within a political yet social veil of silk sets the backdrop of what is contemporary Japanese cinema. A road paved with the mythological stones of cinema the masters which preceded them; the modern film maker in Japan is stock full of tools and techniques sharpened by giants like Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu. Stunted by low budgets and an ocean of Anime difficult is a misnomer when it comes to creating a true film in Japan. Most of Japans modern cinema glories are produced for television or full of non-sense material created for pure profit. It takes a true renegade to break loose form those confines and manifest something that is true art.

To speak of art in modern Japanese film making seems to be a direct link to what would be expected, but not so easy to connect. Two things illuminate this issue. First is the tribulations of World War II and the second is the “multi-party parliamentary representative democratic Constitutional monarchy where the Emperor acts as the ceremonial Head of state, and the Prime Minister acts as the Head of government and the head of the Cabinet which directs the executive branch.” A direct quote pilled from the web. These two elements thwarted the efforts of cinematic artist form creating the “New Wave” of independent themed and styled masterpieces from the past and present. These ripe fruits are for the lack of their direct popularity considered “cult” films today. The America’s enjoy a hand full of Japanese creations and many a fan favorite American director pay their homage by rebuilding the cult classics with a western face.

Two modern students of this emergent genre are Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Takeshi Kitano. Both of which have created a backdrop of culturally and socially focused films as well as many “ghost” related horror films as well. Takeshi Kitano is an outspoken person. His opinions of film and the job of the director are both well established on the cinematic record. Kitano was a well-trained and diverse talent. Comedian, editor, writer, author and dubbed successor to the master Kurosawa; Kitano has used his talents to manifest a unique vision and drive that makes his art shine through the myriad of other directors in Japan. Having a skill set so diverse can in some cases be of enormous asset while such gifts can just as well create chaos and disaster. His early film career consist of the “A” typical Yakuza elemental plot lines although his directing sense is akin to Kurosawa’s with extended takes and cutting the shot to reveal some underlying and unseen truth. Kitano’s later works are more dystopian and bleak. Casting himself in many of his own productions might be a necessity or constraint of budget, in most cases it does not work well. Two films that counter balance between the sublime and the radical stand as bookends to express the diversity Kitano has. ***“Battle Royale” (2000)*** and ***“Dolls” (2002)*** the former he acted and the latter he directed.

Dolls tells the story of three young couples the top plot is about Matsumoto (Hidetoshi Nishijima) and Sawako (Miho Kanno) two quiet and reserved lovers that wish to be together, but due the constraints of the Japanese culture Matsumotos parents wish for him to be paired out to marry a women which his family has arranged. Sawako (the girlfriend) is incapable of dealing with the stripping away of her lover and is lock away in a psychiatric facility. Kitano blends well the traditional and the modern as he directed this film. The use of the open vistas that Japan is known for coupled with a controlled mixture of extreme wide shots and loose close ups you fell the struggles each couple is dealt. Matsumoto turns away from his hastened decision to marry the boss’ daughter to save his true love Sawako in a last minute cinematic move of heroics. The visual depiction of the red rope Sawako uses to bind herself to her heroic lover is a direct signage of the feudal area of Japanese culture. A near experimental film in its looks Dolls is directly name for the play on words of the emotional connections between a man and woman and how true love is tested.

Kiyoshi Kurosawa born eight years after Kitano and bears no relation to the more famous Akira but none the less has created his own fame within the industry. Kiyoshi Kurosawa began his journey in film similar to his counterpart with the cliché Yakuza themed V-Cinema picture as well. He also has had a slight stint with television and continued his career with strong love themed and dark horror films. His directing style is more western than Kitanos’ using the more modern city vistas filled with the ripe pestilence of the over indulgent city scape. It appears that Kurosawa fits where he belongs in the Japanese film culture. He has clearly witnessed the great American director in our own contemporary era. Influenced by his own ideologies of society and the struggle of the everyday man of today his cinematic lexicon is expansive and intimate.

In contrast yet in some way complementary to Dolls is Kiyoshi Kurosawas’ ***“Tokyo Sonata” (2009)***. A compelling story of a husband Ryuhei Sasaki (Teruyuki Kagawa) that loses his very good, bread winning corporate job that has been sustaining both his wife Megumi (Kyoko Koizumi) and teen sons Takashi (Yu Koyanagi) and Kenji (Kai Inowaki) suddenly finds himself without it. He is forced to search work while completely hiding his shame from his family. Kurosawa utilizes the power of his actors well in this film. Anger, shame and the strong sense of self shaming all strong motifs Kurosawa uses as his weaponry to draw in his audience and keep then in his emotional driven trap. The characters individually adorn themselves with their own private shame as each one becomes aware of Ryuheis’ situation. His wife finds out about his rouse when she goes to a mall and stumbles over husband waiting in a soup line for mall workers. The family is slowly becoming unraveled. Ryuheis’ youngest son decides to take his lunch money and use it to pay for his piano lessons. Everyone in the family has their own little escape and uses it as a medication to survive the ordeals of family struggle. Kurosawa makes use of strong camera arrangements with contrasting and tight framing to bring the viewer to an uncomfortable distance to the plot. A Cannes Film winner Tokyo Sonata makes great use of the difficulty families have in the modern day Japan and the traditions of the past with a very strong sense of emotional shame and the economic instabilities that outsourced labor to China has brought.

Both of these directors speak aloud with the feelings of today’s transitional members of Japanese culture. In so far as using themes from the past and sewing them into the tapestry of today’s youth culture these two men drive on a road paved in truth, hard labors, love and beauty. They also have a strong contrasting catalog of films to watch. Form the V-Cinema Yakuza exploitive genre to the uber creepy dead girl ghost genre both men have extended their skill set past what the film makers before them felt comfortable with. Takeshi Kitano is quoted saying

“My film has never been nominated for an Academy Award, even the best feature. I wonder why doesn’t the Academy nominate other films? Who are the members who vote? I believe Mr. Kurosawa has mentioned this, too.”

 It’s clear that both men are in a struggle to be appreciated by their peers. They already have won over their audiences. These two multitalented gentlemen have set a clear path for the new and young film leaders to follow. An ounce of the past, a gram from the future and a pound from the present.

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