Comic Legacies of the Japanese Silver Screen

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Comic Legacies of the Japanese Silver Screen
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All films will be screened at 7pm in the Alice Cinema in the Humanities Quadrangle at Yale University, except for the screening on March 2, which will take place in HQ L02. The screening on April 20 will feature a discussion with Ogigami Naoko and Tomita Mika of the National Film Archive of Japan. Japanese names are rendered according to Japanese custom, with the family name first.

Unfortunately due to problems with the distributor, we were not able to screen **Romantic and Crazy**.
Comic Legacies of the Japanese Silver Screen

February 24 – April 20, 2024

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Aaron Gerow, Xavi Sawada, David Baasch, Eugene Kwon, Adam Silverman, Ania Tropnikova, and Chloe Yan
The Japanese people have for better or worse of- ten been defined by comedy—or the perceived lack of it. If American fears of Japan Inc. in the 1980s, for instance, created an image of a robot-like Japanese salaryman who was all work and no play, later foreign circulation of video clips on YouTube, which were extracted from Japanese variety shows, presented Japanese as pursuing excessive and ridiculous stunts for a laugh. If the former involved chuckling at a Japanese incapable of laughter, the latter promoted sniggering less at the stunt gag than at the supposed silliness of Japanese themselves. In both cases, whether Japanese were seen to laugh or not, their relation to humor was considered less than normal.

Perhaps the Japanese relation to comedy presents a challenge to foreign observers, not because of its perceived异常ity, but because of its different socio-historical valences. Humor in Japan has a long history, appearing even in the eighth century Nihon Shoki, where the gods who founded Japan could be seen having a good laugh. The classical and deadly serious nō theatre pieces were usually performed with a comedic kyōgen play sandwiched in between starting around the thirteenth century. Humorous books and folk performances formed the background for the formation of later arts such as rakugo, Japan’s still-popular form of “sit-down” comedy, in the early Edo Period (1603–1868). The modern era brought comedy revues starring great comedians like Enomoto Ken’ichi (Enoken) and Furukawa Roppa, as well as the solidification of the currently dominant form of stage comedy: manzai (composed of repartee between a straight man and a clown). Comedy variety shows, which include both manzai and skit comedians, dominate Japanese television today, while products of that format, such as Kitano Takeshi (Hana-Bi), have come to represent Japanese cinema abroad. But as the scholar Marguerite Wells has shown, through much of this history humor has been a problematic object in Japan: enjoyed by many, but in conflict with Confucian or aesthetic values, only valorized if it was not too funny.

Japanese film comedy begins with the earliest productions and was heavily influenced by foreign silent comedians. Pioneer director Thomas Kurihara’s Sanji Gotō (1918), for instance, features a character clearly based on Chaplin’s Tramp, as Chaplin’s mix of humor and pathos aligned with what would become a predominant thread in Japanese film production. Even if slapstick dominated the films of early comic masters like Saitō Torajirō (Buddhist Mass for Goemon Ishikawa), studios like Shōchiku tried to mix comedy with melodrama, which is why its most famous director, Ozu Yasujirō (of Tokyo Story fame, here Fighting Friends), could
often switch between comedic and serious moments, even in the same film. Given the centrality of spoken comedy in rakugo or manzai, however, it was the coming of sound that boosted the film comedy genre in the 1930s, as Enoken (Romantic and Crazy) and Roppa brought their staged musical comedies to the screen, and directors such as Makino Masahiro (Singing Lovebirds) combined the film musical with laughter and action. Comedy was a problematic genre in an increasingly militaristic Japan, as manzai comedians could be roped into the war effort, but satire remained one route for directors such as Itami Mansaku (Akanishi Kakita) and Yamanaka Sadao (Tange Sazen and the Pot Worth a Million Ryō) to poke fun at both generic convention and socio-political restrictions.

Both musical comedy and social satire returned with a vengeance after World War II, but so did film adaptations of humorous literature. While Ibuse Masuji is known for his Hiroshima novel Black Rain, he was also one of modern Japan’s great humorous writers, masterfully mixing wry smiles, satire, and sorrowful social critique in works that led to films such as Doctor’s Day Off and Room for Rent. If such films were on the high-art end, the rise of the movies as Japan’s dominant form of entertainment meant that the mass-produced series became the predominant form of film comedy in the 1950s and 60s. Tōhō’s Company President series, which started with Nest Egg, ran for over thirty films, most with the same actors and directors. Shōchiku’s Tora-san series, featuring the eponymous Tramp-like character, continued for forty-eight films until the lead actor, Atsumi Kiyoshi, passed away. This could appear to represent the conservative side of postwar comedy—and indeed the Irresponsible series starring the Crazy Cats has been seen as a biting critique of the Company President films’ benevolent view of corporate Japan—but repetition has been core to Japanese comedy such as rakugo, where in the retellings of classical stories the key is not the new joke but how well the old joke is told. Yamada Yōji, the creator of the Tora-san films, was an avid rakugo fan and liberally used parts of rakugo stories in Gambler’s Luck. By the 1960s, however, one could see a New Wave in film comedy as well, as satire and parody could be coupled with formal playfulness and overall outrageousness to produce films like Oh, My Bomb! and Make Way for the Jaguars! The comedy series declined with the end of the studio system in the 1970s, making way in the 1980s for a wide diversity of indie comedies ranging from All Under the Moon, a satire of zainichi Korean life in Japan, to Kamome Diner, a humorous re-envisioning of Japanese women’s lives through life abroad.

It is an illustrious history, but one that has rarely been covered by scholars or film programmers. There is no academic book on the larger history of Japanese film comedy in any language, including Japanese. The fact that our series could not introduce many core aspects of Japanese film comedy—such as the brilliant Irresponsible series—because little of it has been subtitled, reveals how the vision of Japanese cinema, in Japan and abroad, is rarely related to comedy. (We are subtitling Make Way for the Jaguars! ourselves.) Watching Japanese film comedy is then one way of questioning that vision and perhaps rethinking what Japan—and even comedy—means.
The production of *Buddhist Mass for Goemon Ishikawa* was occasioned by the anniversary of the death of Ishikawa Goemon, a sixteenth-century, Robin Hood-like folk hero famous for attempting to assassinate the feudal lord Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Any filmgoer in the year 1930 would have been familiar with Goemon and his myth, as he was the subject of tens of stories and *kabuki* plays since the late Edo period. The image of Goemon we see in the film—blackened eyes and eyebrows, white face, windswept hair, dramatic gestures—is the Goemon of *kabuki*, especially as he appears in the play *The Temple Gate and the Paulownia Crest* (*Sanmon gozan no kiri*) written by Namiki Gohei I (1747–1808).

According to the legend, Goemon was punished for his attempt on Hideyoshi’s life by being boiled alive together with his young son, whom he attempted to save by lifting over his head (a pose we see the cinematic Goemon assume repeatedly). Goemon was also reputedly proficient in *ninjutsu* (the art of the *ninja*), which permits him to fly, split swords in half, and conjure pyrotechnic displays when he appears on the *kabuki* stage.

When Goemon’s memorial service takes place in the film, a placard announces it is currently the 339th anniversary of his death—making the year of his death 1591, counting back from the year 1930 (though the more widely accepted date of his death is 1594). However, it is the month of his death—August—rather than the year, that motivated the film’s making: Shōchiku desperately needed to make a comedy that would be appropriate for the Obon holidays, which take place in mid-July or mid-August, depending on the region. Making a film about Goemon, whose death is commemorated in August, met the exhibitors’ demands for seasonal fare.

*Goemon Ishikawa* belongs to a genre of film comedy that advertisers and critics called “Kamata comedy shorts” (*Kamata tanpen kigeki*), “nonsense comedies” (*nansensu kigeki*), and sometimes “niwaka films” (*niwaka eiga*). The last, “niwaka film,” was a reference to their brevity, loose, seemingly improvisational acting style, and tendency to satirize current events—qualities associated with *niwaka*, a form of working-class, mostly improvised sketch comedy popular around the turn of the century. Kamata comedy shorts were usually two to four reels long (translating to run times of roughly 20 to 40 minutes), and usually shown in programs with two to four other films: a common exhibition format circa 1930 consisted of one such comedy short, one news-reel, and two longer fiction films (often one *jidaigeki* [period film] and one *gendaigeki* [contemporary film]).

Kamata comedy shorts were famous for being made on shoestring budgets: when the studio began making them in the mid-1920s, it began reducing the standard length of their longer films by about 1,000 feet (or about one reel each) and using the resulting raw stock to make the two-reel comedies (they also economized by using the same sets, costumes, and actors as the longer films). Three films could be made in this way for almost the cost of two.

Kamata comedy shorts were also made at breakneck speed, since the studio needed to produce a fresh batch of films every ten days to compete with live theaters (whose programs changed thrice monthly). Saitō Torajirō, the film’s director, described the manic production process as follows: “After [choosing a topic], we would write the script on the same day, go location-hunting the morning after, and prepare the set that night…by the fourth day we would release a 3,000- to 4,000-foot short film…they were made at more or less the same speed as newsreels.”

This approach to production directly shapes what we see on screen. There was no time to develop original, complex stories or nuanced characters, thus parodies of famous plays already familiar to audiences or topical satire became the go-to subjects. In Kamata comedy shorts, humor does not usually arise from plot or situation, but from pratfalls and fights that have little or no narrative implications. Ensuring there is a minimum number of gags is more important than maintaining the illusion of a plausible narrative world: if it serves the end of producing laughter, characters are permitted to contradict themselves, behave irrationally, inexplicably disappear and reappear, die and be reborn, and ignore the laws of physics. Hence the close association between the Kamata comedy short and “nonsense”—these are films that are intentionally, necessarily, and often delightfully absurd.

*(Xavi Sawada)*
The title of the film, *Fighting Friends* (a.k.a. *Fighting Friends—Japanese Style*), is an homage to the American 1927 comedy *McFadden's Flats* (released in Japan as *Kenka tomodachi*, literally “Fighting Friends”). *McFadden's Flats* was a Charlie Murray and Chester Conklin vehicle, a pair of screen comedians who were immensely popular in Japan in the 1920s. *McFadden's Flats* chronicles the relationship between Irish immigrant Dan McTavish (Murray) and Scottish immigrant Jock McTavish (Conklin), who become fast friends despite their different backgrounds. Plot-wise, *Fighting Friends* borrows from both *McFadden's Flats* and another American film, *The Uninvited Guest* (dir. Ralph Ince, 1924), whose poster we briefly see hanging in Tomekichi and Yoshizō’s apartment. In *The Uninvited Guest*, a man rescues a shipwrecked woman named Olive (Jean Tolley), and the two eventually marry after a series of adventures that take them across the globe.

In *Fighting Friends*, shipwrecked Olive is reimagined as the amnesiac Omitsu, who is mysteriously found unconscious on the side of the road; and the new American immigrants McFadden and McTavish are transformed into Tokyo co-workers Tomekichi and Yoshizō. In *Fighting Friends*, Omitsu and the neighbor Okamura fall in love and get married — in the process helping repair the friendship between Tomekichi and Yoshizō — paralleling the romance between McFadden’s daughter and McTavish’s son, which serves a similarly reconciliatory function in *McFadden's Flats*.

*Fighting Friends* was not originally a comedy short like *Goemon Ishikawa*, but a 77-minute “feature” film. The version we have today is based on a greatly condensed 14-minute, 9.5mm Pathé Baby version made for home use. Five of the seven original reels have been cut. The cut footage would have run after the shot of Omitsu crying as Tomekichi and Yoshizō leave for work, which we see at about the seven-minute mark. Reviews allow us to reconstruct what would have followed this shot: Tomekichi and Yoshizō continue to compete with each other for Omitsu’s affections, a competition that sours their friendship. The friends eventually discover that Omitsu is not in love with either of them, but with Okamura (the man we see Omitsu meet at the communal water pump). Instead of being jealous, the friends are relieved that Omitsu is in a relationship with another man, since this clears up their antagonism and helps renew their friendship. However, one day the friends spot Okamura walking home with a geisha and forbid Omitsu from seeing him again, believing he is a capricious womanizer. Eventually the friends discover the geisha is Okamura’s sister, not a lover. Okamura manages to find a salaried job and proposes to Omitsu, and the film ends with the friends sending the lovers off on their honeymoon. Though this shortened print reproduces the first seven minutes of the theatrical release version in their entirety, the rest consists of scenes showing the friends fighting, the budding relationship between Omitsu and Okamura, and the final send-off.

*Fighting Friends* is not a “nonsense comedy” like *Goemon Ishikawa*. It was billed as a *seikigeki* — a “straight” or “correct” comedy— when it opened at the Asakusa Teikokukan on July 5, 1929 (where it was shown on a double bill with Itō Daisuke’s left-leaning “tendency film,” *Issatsu tashōken*). Film companies began to label films *seikigeki* in the 1920s to distinguish longer, narratively complex, and “realistic” comedies from nonsense shorts. *Seikigeki* was a modification of the word *seigeki* — a literal translation of the English “straight play”— a term used to refer to pure spoken drama that did not include music or dance. *Seikigeki*, like *seigeki*, implies both a grounding in a strong dramatic plot and the absence of spectacle, including gratuitous slapstick.

Indeed, though it is perhaps hard to tell from the surviving fragments, the dramatic, romantic plot is more central to *Fighting Friends* than it is to nonsense shorts such as *Goemon Ishikawa*. The gags are also of a noticeably different genre. In general, gags in *seikigeki* are not just intended to make the audience laugh, but to reveal character: the series of egg-and-chicken gags, for example, help divulge the competitive yet amicable relationship between Tomekichi and Yoshizō. This genre of comedy—feature-length, centered around romantic plots, with primarily character-driven gags—more closely resembles the “gentee” American screen comedy of the 1920s (especially the Harold Lloyd comedies) than the pre-classical, early Keystone short (with which Kamata nonsense shorts, by contrast, are often compared).

(Xavi Sawada)
Enoken noshun suikoden エノケンの青春水虎伝, alternative title Hogaraka na seishun 朗らかな青春
Year: 1934
Studio: Photo Chemical Laboratories (P.C.L.)
Director: Yamamoto Kajirō
Cast: Enomoto Ken’ichi (Enomoto), Chiba Sachiko (Machiko), Tsutsumi Masako (Rirako), Futamura Tei’ichi (Futamura), Kisaragi Kanta (Kisaragi)

**Romantic and Crazy** was the first of many films starring Enoken (Enomoto Ken’ichi’s stage name), the undisputed king of prewar Japanese comedy. Enoken first entered the public eye as troupe leader of Casino Follies, a small revue based in the Asakusa neighborhood of Tokyo. Casino Follies suddenly rose to Empire-wide fame when Kawabata Yasunari used its members as characters in *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, a short novel serialized in *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun* between December 1929 and February 1930. Kawabata helped create a public perception of the revue as a vanguard performance art that boldly used speed, spectacle, and eros to capture the sensations of contemporary urban life, an aesthetic encapsulated in his famous one-line description: “Eroticism and nonsense and speed and topical manga-like humor and jazz songs and women’s legs.”

**Romantic and Crazy** is an interesting attempt to rework the fragmented, non-narrative structure of Enoken’s live revue into a coherent narrative film. Enoken’s revue was structurally quite different from the classic 1920s New York revue, in which a series of song-and-dance numbers were performed by the same ensemble of characters and connected by an overarching narrative. It was instead much closer to the modular, early 20th century American vaudeville show: a single program started with a playlet; followed by a “variety” section that might include solo singers, chorus lines, jazz bands, dancers, and miscellaneous acts; and concluded with one or two more short playlets or operettas.

**Romantic and Crazy** uses different strategies to give a sense of unity to revue acts that would have been performed separately on stage. Song-and-dance numbers and comic sketches are sometimes only thematically, not narratively, linked to each other (such as the first song-and-dance number, “Koi no haru,” whose only connection to the rest of the film appears to be that it is performed on a college campus). Other scenes and musical numbers are connected narratively by the central romantic plot, though often in a rather loose and confusing fashion. This hybrid structure gives the film a distinctive feel compared to other late 1920s and early 1930s “revue films”: it is not as rigorously segmented and paratactic as early Hollywood revue films such as *Paramount on Parade* (1930); yet it is also not as dedicated to developing plot and character as the Marx Brothers’ *The Cocoanuts* (1929) or Eddie Cantor’s *Whoopie!* (1930).

The most notable feature of **Romantic and Crazy** is its thick web of references to a new kind of urban consumer culture. Japanese silent comedies of the late 1920s and early 1930s often parodically reworked other films, plays, and novels, encouraging the audience to participate in the fun of comparing the familiar with its comic interpretation (cf. *Goemon Ishikawa and Fighting Friends*). In **Romantic and Crazy**, the game of cultural references is much more intricate and pervasive. Individual gags, songs, costumes, and scenes are, more often than not, citations of mass-mediated cultural products. Visual quotations of foreign films are particularly blatant (the slow dolly toward the outside of Enoken’s office building followed by a dissolve revealing the office floor is a nod to King Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928); the whole “stealing” the Mona Lisa subplot parodies the 1931 German film *Der Raub der Mona Lisa*; the pantomimed scene in which Enoken buys flowers for Rirako reconfigures *City Lights* (1931); and so forth). Other citations are more local (Enoken sticking his tongue out at the camera, which opens and closes the film, is a playful jab at the psychiatrist-cum-poet Saitō Mokichi, known to compulsively stick his tongue out while treating patients). Many of the songs are rearrangements of Irving Berlin or George Gershwin tunes set to Japanese lyrics; and there are countless references to the Tokyo revue world and Enoken’s off-screen persona.

This elaborate citational game is not simply a conceit but the film’s *raison*: the film is designed to reward those who can catch the “in-jokes” by virtue of their knowledge of Western cinema, modern literature, American records, and revue shows—cultural products that were consumed primarily by young, urban, college-educated, middle-class men, or the so-called “intellectual class” (interi-sō). **Romantic and Crazy** testifies to a larger shift that occurred in mid-thirties Japanese cinema as the new sound studios attempted to target the urban intellectual class—a group that generally flocked to European and American films but avoided Japanese ones—and exemplifies the new style of comedy that would come to dominate the Imperial screen as a result.

(Xavi Sawada)
Singing Lovebirds

PLOT:
Asai Reizaburō is a masterless samurai enjoying a carefree life residing in a poor section of town. Next door lives Shimura Kyōsai, who earns a living making umbrellas with his daughter Oharu, who is in love with Asai but is consternated by a father who repeatedly wastes their money on purchasing antiques, most of which are worthless. Nearby, Otomi, the daughter of the rich merchant Kagawaya, makes approaches at Asai too, and the samurai Tōyama, a friend of Asai’s father, attempts to marry off his daughter Fujio to Asai. Asai, however, rejects them all. One day the local lord, Minezawa, who also loves antiques, catches a glimpse of Oharu and is determined to make her his own, contriving to force Shimura into debt so that he has no choice but to give up his daughter. Asai comes to the rescue and defeats Minezawa’s retainers, and finally confesses his love for Oharu. But when Asai declares he dislikes wealthy women and prepares to leave town, Oharu smashes the pot and the two reconcile.

COMMENTARY:
Singing Lovebirds (a.k.a. Samurai Musical) is a unique and delightful mixture of romantic comedy, the musical, and the jidaigeki (samurai film), one which may seem out of place for 1939, when Japan was already deeply at war in China and suffering from an oppressively militarist government. However, director Makino Masahiro could often throw generic curveballs during this era. The son of Makino Shōzō, a film producer and director who is often called “the father of Japanese cinema,” Makino began acting in films as a child before directing his first film at age eighteen and helming several critically acclaimed works before he was twenty-one. By the time he died in 1993, he had directed over 260 films, while also becoming one of Japan’s most celebrated directors not known abroad. He was the consummate genre auteur, making films of many genres with speed and efficiency, but in a way such that the critic Yamane Sadao once declared: “Makino Masahiro breathed like air the fact that cinema could become anything, that it could be that free.” In narrative terms, that freedom centered on men and women enthusiastically acting from a basic innocence, and in terms of film form, it entailed a style founded on speed and tempo. It was thus understandable that Makino found his home most often not just in action films, but also in musicals—or their combination, as when the thrilling final duel in Blood Spilled at Takadanoba (1937) can equally be called one of the best dance numbers of Japanese film history. Even during the war, he could audaciously throw in Busby Berkeley-style dance choreography in propaganda works like The Opium War and Hanako-san (both 1943).

Singing Lovebirds was made on the fly, but that was Makino’s métier. He was supposed to be making another film with Kataoka Chiezō when the star fell ill, so the director quickly shot an operetta-style musical during Chiezō’s recovery using largely the same cast (that’s why Chiezō appears so little even though he’s the star). The script was so quickly penned that many of the character names come from the actors’ own names. Music was composed by Ōkubo Tokujirō, who brought along his lyricist partner Shimada Kin’ya and Teichiku Records stars like Dick Mine and Hattori Tomiko. The cinematographer was Miyagawa Kazuo, who later became Japan’s most celebrated cameraman for such films as Rashomon and Ugetsu. One of the highlights is hearing Shimura Takashi, star of such Kurosawa Akira classics as The Seven Samurai and Ikiru, singing a ditty to a pot. Long ignored as a frivolous film, Singing Lovebirds is now considered one of Japan’s best musical comedies.

(Aaron Gerow)
Akanishi Kakita

PLOT:
The protagonist of Akanishi Kakita (a.k.a. Capricious Young Man), a middle-aged samurai adroitly dispatched by his lord, is tasked with a covert operation within the Date clan in Edo. Charged with uncovering the veracity of a rumored rebellion, Akanishi diligently gathers intelligence, ultimately unearthing a conspiracy. Amidst his espionage, he is assigned the role of mentor to the new maid, Sazanami, guiding her through the preliminaries of her service. Conceiving a stratagem for escape, Akanishi orchestrates his own rejection by penning a love letter to Sazanami, hoping for denial and a discreet departure. However, the plan comically unravels as Sazanami unexpectedly reciprocates his advances, thwarting his intentions.

COMMENTARY:
Akanishi Kakita, along with the 1932 film Peerless Patriot, stands as a testament to Itami Mansaku’s exemplary contributions to cinematic satire. These films, through their depiction of atypical antiheroes, are heralded as masterpieces of “nonsense jidaigeki.” Itami’s craftsmanship lies not in devaluing the samurai as a class, but in maintaining their dignity while simultaneously exposing their follies through the escapades of an unlikely character such as Akanishi. Our protagonist Akanishi, an unconventional samurai, indulges himself in sweets that cause stomach aches and plays Japanese chess against an imaginary opponent in his own room. Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie describe Akanishi as “a genuine character study of a samurai who was not a hero in any conventional sense of the word, being instead a very ordinary man, weak in body if strong in spirit.”

Kataoka Chiezō’s dual role as Akanishi and the opposing clan leader, Harada Kai, adds a layer of complexity to the film. As Akanishi, Kataoka embodies the everyman, speaking in the vernacular and stripped of the theatrics common to period films. In contrast, his portrayal of Harada Kai is steeped in the stylized tradition of kabuki, with stylized kabuki jargon and stark white makeup, further accentuating Itami’s critique of antiquated jidaigeki tropes. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto observes, “Itami pretends to showcase Chiezō’s star value by casting him in the two leading roles but in fact develops a metacriticism of jidaigeki’s obsolete generic conventions by contrasting the naturalistic look of [the hero] Akanishi and the utterly artificial, antique-looking appearance of [his opponent] Kai”. The juxtaposition of Akanishi’s realism against Harada Kai’s artifice deftly parodies the ossified conventions that had come to define jidaigeki, signaling Itami’s intent to evolve the genre from its rigid, stylized origins to a more nuanced and self-aware form.

As with Yamanaka Sadao, Itami’s approach to the genre is primarily comic. Both directors infused jidaigeki with a modern, satirical edge, critiquing not only the fetishization of the samurai code, but also the broader societal obsession with honor and loyalty. Itami’s satire extends beyond feudal Japan, offering a veiled critique of contemporary societal values. This layering of themes demonstrates Itami’s acuity in making his work relevant across temporal boundaries.

Itami’s pioneering use of sound in Akanishi Kakita serves not only as a dramatic device but also as a critical component of the film’s humor. The integration of classical Western music, such as Chopin’s “Raindrop” Prelude and Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March,” is a deliberate anachronism that juxtaposes the grandiose or somber tones of European compositions against the backdrop of Edo-period Japan, resulting in a comic incongruity that is both jarring and amusing. As such, the soundtrack of Akanishi Kakita becomes a character in its own right, offering a whimsical yet pointed reminder of the film’s modern sensibilities amidst its historical setting. Itami’s sound design is not merely a technical achievement but a narrative tool that reinforces the film’s status as a masterwork of comedic artistry.

Itami Mansaku entered the film industry under the influence of Itô Daisuke initially as a screenwriter. Inagaki Hiroshi (1905-80) directed Itami’s scripts. But Itami quickly started directing his own films. As with Yamanaka, Itami’s career as a director ended by 1938 as his health condition worsened. Itami Mansaku is the father of Itami Jûzô, who sustained Mansaku’s comedic influence of Itō Daisuke initially as a screenwriter. Inagaki Hiroshi (1905-80) directed Itami’s scripts. But Itami quickly started directing his own films. As with Yamanaka, Itami’s career as a director ended by 1938 as his health condition worsened. Itami Mansaku is the father of Itami Jûzô, who sustained Mansaku’s comedic approach to cinema throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and father-in-law to Nobel laureate Ōe Kenzaburō.

(Chloe Yen)
Tange Sazen and the Pot Worth a Million Ryō

PLOT:
As its name suggests, Tange Sazen and the Pot Worth a Million Ryō is about a pot that is worth a fortune because it contains a map that reveals the location of hidden treasure. The lord of the Yagyū Clan in Iga is after the pot, which was given to Genzaburō, the younger brother of the Yagyū lord. The lord sends a messenger to Genzaburō in Edo to get the pot back, only to find out that Genzaburō’s wife has sold it off to random junk dealers without knowing the pot’s value. Things grow more comedic as the pot happens to fall into the hands of an orphan whose father was killed by gangsters and who was taken in by Tange Sazen and his partner. The film’s narrative is punctuated by running gags that serve as comedic motifs throughout the story. Genzaburō’s escapades, under the guise of searching for the pot, become a recurring source of amusement, as his ineptitude and attempts to evade his wife’s scrutiny add a layer of domestic comedy to the film’s broader farce.

COMMENTARY:
The fictional character Tange Sazen is a one-armed, one-eyed master swordsman from the novels of Hayashi Fubō, first made famous on screen through Itō Daisuke’s films in the late 1920s. The screen persona of Tange Sazen as a nihilist masterless samurai was defined by Ōkōchi Denjirō, who was trained under Sawada Shōjirō, founder of a new school of popular theater known as shinkokugeki. In Yamanaka’s vision, Tange Sazen transcends his one-armed, one-eyed swordsman’s visage to emerge as a congenial bodyguard, steeped in humor and tinged with humanity. This transformation is emblematized, for example, by his domestic life with a lover and their operation of an archery parlor—a space alive with the vibrancy of Edo-period entertainment, where Sazen’s martial prowess becomes a backdrop to his more grounded, relatable endeavors.

The modern touch of contemporary sensibilities and lightheartedness have made Tange Sazen and the Pot Worth a Million Ryō one of the most successful and celebrated comedies in Japanese cinema. The film’s humor is deft and situational, emerging from the characters’ interactions and the absurdity of their predicaments rather than relying on overt comedic devices. Yamanaka’s nuanced understanding of the human condition shines through in the way he crafts each character, imbuing them with depth and dimension that transcend their societal roles. The film erases the class distinctions that dominated feudal Japanese society by attributing human foolishness to a master swordsman like Tange Sazen, and making all the characters in the film laughable. Creating a screen space where audiences can easily identify with human foibles universal to all social classes, Tange Sazen and Pot Worth a Million Ryō elevates itself beyond a simple parody of jidaigeki period cinema to become a modern comedy in a jidaigeki format.

One of the most legendary figures in Japanese cinema, Yamanaka was trained in the Makino studio with the help of Makino Masahiro, son of Makino Shōzō, the “father” of Japanese cinema. Yamanaka’s works consistently reduce the status of samurai from the ideological image of superhero to the common level. In his last film Humanity and Paper Balloons, Yamanaka presents a somber narrative that contrasts sharply with Tange Sazen and the Pot Worth a Million Ryō. Yet, both films are united by Yamanaka’s critical eye for the rigid ranking systems of feudal Japan, and in how they use the medium of cinema to question and comment on the social hierarchies of his time. Tange Sazen and Pot Worth a Million Ryō is one of only three surviving masterpieces of Yamanaka Sadao oeuvre of twenty-six films, the other two being Humanity and Paper Balloons and Köchiyama Sōshun (1936). Yamanaka died in 1938 from an illness on the China front in the war when he was only twenty-eight years old.

(Chloe Yan)
Room for Rent

PLOT:
Translated as either Room for Rent or Room for Let in English, this film by Kawashima Yūzō, like Doctor’s Day Off, is an adaptation of an Ibuse Masui novel. When Tsuyama Yumiko, a potter by profession, enters an old mansion overlooking Osaka enquiring about a room to rent, she discovers a bizarre collection of characters dwelling in the humble abode. There is a low-level gangster and panty thief, an old army sergeant and cabbage roll specialist, and a female illegal liquor vendor—to name a few. The leader of the menagerie is Yoda Gorō, an eccentric jack of all trades. His simplicity and naivety, however, make him susceptible to unscrupulous manipulators.

COMMENTARY:
In this film, one of Kawashima’s characters declares, “Jinsei wa sayonara dake da,” meaning “life is nothing but goodbyes.” Those words, engraved later on Kawashima’s gravestone and borrowed by Imamura Shōhei for his written reminiscence of the director, seemed to anticipate his early death and exemplify the melancholy that underlies his humor.

For many cinephiles in both Japan and overseas, Kawashima Yūzō is the missing link between the classical Japanese cinema and the New Wave. He was an apprentice at Shōchiku of such studio stalwarts as Kinoshita Keisuke and Shibuya Minoru and a teacher of Imamura Shōhei (who would go on to become a leader of the New Wave and twice-time winner of the Palme d’Or at Cannes with Ballad of Narayama and The Eel). Kawashima made films combining the care and precision of the studio era with the flamboyance and daring of the 1960s, such as with his most well-known film, The Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate (a.k.a. Bakumatsu Taiyoden, 1957, co-written with Imamura and produced at Nikkatsu studios). For Imamura, Kawashima “personified the Japanese New Wave ten years before its emergence,” a tribute that testifies to Kawashima’s lasting impact despite his premature death in 1963.

Kawashima’s films have a distinct worldview that many associate with his chronic poor health. In his oeuvre, subtle and poignant realist dramas jostle with freewheeling, unpredictable comedies poised between satire and farce. While his earthiness is symbolized by the repeated appearance of toilets in his film, he often features heroes who desire to escape their world. An expert stylist, Kawashima delighted in elaborate compositions, favouring group shots over close-ups. He favored placing his actors strategically amidst props and furnishings. In his films, the actors move freely, with Kawashima encouraging breezy, noisy, vital performances that made full use of facial expression, tone of voice, posture, gesture and movement. Critic Ueno Kōshi has described the importance in his films of “the structure of space and the interaction between space and people.”

(Eugene Kwon)
Doctor’s Day Off

Honjitsu kyūshin 本日休診
Year: 1952
Studio: Shōchiku (Ōfuna)
Director: Shibuya Minoru
Script: Saitō Ryōsuke, based on a novel by Ibuse Masuji
Cast: Yanagi Eijirō (Dr. Mikumo), Sumi Rieko (Yūko), Tsuruta Kōji (Tsuwano), Awashima Chikage (Omachi), Mikuni Renatarō (Yūsaku), Sada Keiji (Haruzō)

PLOT:
One year after restarting his clinic after the end of the war, Dr. Mikumo plans to take a well-deserved day off by visiting a hot spring resort with his nephew Gosuke and the clinic’s nurse Taki. However, a local war veteran, Yūsaku, is brought to the clinic by his mother after he suffers a delusional fit. Dr. Mikumo can do nothing but pretend to be Yūsaku’s commanding officer to calm him down. However, this is just the beginning of a very busy day for the poor doctor, who must deal with the various complaints and issues that come up on his day off.

COMMENTARY:
An adaptation of Ibuse Masuji’s eponymous novel, Doctor’s Day Off is a tragic comedy that revolves around the hard-working Dr. Mikumo. The director, Shibuya Minoru, adopts an absurdist tone for this ensemble comedy, which takes place in a postwar Japan where ordinary poor citizens are still recovering both economically and emotionally from the devastation and traumas of the war. In films like Doctor’s Day Off (a.k.a. Adventure in Tokyo), the film critic Chris Fujiwara contends that Shibuya “made his mark as an ironic but compassionate chronicler of the difficulties of the early postwar period.”

Shibuya Minoru’s passion for cinema began during his English Literature studies at Keiō University. He began his cinematic career in 1929 as an unpaid assistant camera operator at the Japanese studio Shōchiku, home to directors such as Ozu Yasujirō, Mizoguchi Kenji, Kinoshita Keisuke and Yamada Yōji.

While at Shōchiku, Shibuya went on to become an assistant director to such famed filmmakers as Naruse Mikio and Gosho Heinosuke. He eventually directed the majority of his forty-plus films between the 1930s and the 1960s. Among his films are box-office hits that carved out an important role for him in a Japanese film industry that was not used to comedies. His important films deal specifically with the post-World War II period, mostly social dramas and comedies that find a balance between irony and disillusionment. Shibuya’s films depict a Japan confronting essentially urban issues, and are strewn with themes such as the post-war inheritance, the ever-growing generational gap between tradition and modernity, human relationships dictated by money and social climbing, alcoholism, and the Japanese acceptance of foreign customs.

Ibuse Masuji is most famous for his novel Black Rain (later filmed by Imamura Shōhei), which depicts the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, but he was also also one of modern Japan’s masters of humorous literature, even though most of that humor was defined less by hilarity than by wry and subtle jabs at Japanese society.

Doctor’s Day Off features a cast composed of many of the actors who would lead Japanese cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, including Sada Keiji, Mikuni Rentarō, Tsuruta Kōji, Awashima Chikage, and even Kishi Keiko in a small role.

(Eugene Kwon)
Oh, My Bomb!

PLOT:
The sixth head of the Ōna crime family, Ōna Daisaku is leaving prison after a three-year term. His cellmate Tarō pleads to become a member of the gang, but Daisaku refuses. Yet when Daisaku leaves prison and returns to his mob’s headquarters, he is shocked to see it has been transformed into an election campaign headquarters. Yatō Yasaburō has taken over the gang, leaving even Daisaku’s wife in poverty, obsessed with a religious cult and living off the pittance their child Kensaku earns from odd jobs. Learning that Tarō is an expert at bomb making, Daisaku orders him to construct a bomb inside a fountain pen. They conspire to switch the pen in Yatō’s suit for the bomb, but Yato’s driver carries the suit to the bank and leaves it there when bank robbers suddenly appear. That pen is then passed from person to person until Kensaku gets it, much to Daisaku’s shock: he throws it away seconds before it explodes. After Yatō loses the election, Daisaku then offers to assassinate the winner for money and makes Tarō build a golf ball bomb. That, too, threatens Kensaku when the boy ends up serving as caddie for the politician. Tarō rushes to the golf course in the car but is blown up when the ball hits him.

COMMENTARY:
Based on a story by Cornell Woolrich, Oh, My Bomb! is in many ways a musical, but quite an unusual one: while studios like Tōhō and Daiei were competing that year to make Japan’s “first true” Hollywood-style musical though works like Asphalt Girl and You Can Succeed, Too! (both 1964), Okamoto Kihachi intervened with a work that is replete with traditional Japanese music and performance, from kyōgen to kabuki. But far from attempting to make a “pure” Japanese musical, Okamoto produces a hilariously pop mix of musical and gangster movie, satire and parody, Japan and Hollywood, old and new. The film’s audacious play with genre boundaries may be more stunning if you know that it was released in a double feature with one of the most celebrated films of the Japanese New Wave: Teshigahara Hiroshi’s Woman in the Dunes. Okamoto, who trained under Makino Masahiro (Singing Lovebirds), shared not just his teacher’s ability to span genres, working in everything from modern gangster tales to samurai movies, but also his love of speed, rhythm, and the musical. But if Makino’s characters bore a basic innocence, Okamoto’s world is often both stylish and cynical, parodying genre while sometimes engaging in both postmodern pastiche and social critique. His fantastically bizarre spy flick Age of Assassins (1967) was only one step away from the bleak absurdism of his indie film The Human Bullet (1968). Star Itō Yūnosuke was, like co-star Sunazuka Hideo, trained in kabuki, but became known for his unique, atypical secondary characters in films such as Kurosawa Akira’s Ikiru (1952) and Masumura Yasuzō’s Giants and Toys (1958). Oh, My Bomb! was, along with Ichikawa Kon’s satire Pu-san (1953), one of his few lead roles.

(Aaron Gerow)
After winning Best Director for 1989’s A Sign Days, Yokohama Film Festival darling Sai Yōichi scored even more acclaim for his next production, 1993’s All Under the Moon, pocketing Best Director and Best Film at Yokohama, then the same awards at the 18th Hōchi Film Awards. Ranked number one in Kinema Junpō’s Ten Best Japanese Films of that year, it also went on to win Best Picture at the Mainichi Film Awards and the Blue Ribbon Film awards, became a contender for the Japanese Academy Prize (an Oscar equivalent), and was granted an unusually long run due to its sheer popularity (though perhaps also due to its usage of “dangerous terminology”). This is all the more remarkable given that All Under the Moon confronts head-on the sensitive topic of zainichi, long-term Japanese residents of Korean descent who are subject to xenophobia despite being multiple generations removed from their “Korean” roots, i.e., their ancestors who emigrated while Korea was under Japanese rule in the decades preceding World War II. Sai himself became Japan’s most prominent zainichi director.

All Under the Moon tracks the travails of Tadao (played by Kishitani Gorō), a North Korean zainichi cabbie who works for a taxi company owned by another Korean resident aspiring to run a golf course. Based on an adaption of the novel Taxi Rhapsody (1981) by Osaka zainichi novelist Yang Seok-il (also known by his Japanese pennames, Yan Sogiru and Yanagawa Masao), All Under the Moon brings to life Yang’s quasi-autobiographical account of his own experience suffering discrimination while trying to eke a living as a taxi driver in Tokyo’s infamous Shinjuku. Allegedly, it was one drunken night at a snack bar at Shinjuku that led to the novel’s creation, when a publication editor overheard Yang’s account of various encounters with passengers and encouraged him to publish the anecdotes in the form of a book. The popularity of All Under the Moon helped launch Yang’s writing career into the limelight, and soon to follow was his more properly semi-autobiographical novel tracking the life of his father, Blood and Bones (1998), which led to another productive collaboration with Sai Yōichi for a film by the same title starring none other than Kitano Takeshi (2004). That film was nominated for twelve Japanese Academy Awards, winning four.

Other highlights of the cast of All Under the Moon include the fiercely independent Connie, a Filipino “zainichi” played by 18th Hōchi Awards Best Actress Ruby Moreno; a “businessman” played by Hagiwara Masato (the amnesiac Mamiya from Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s 1997 Cure), and prolific South Korean actress Kim Soo-Jin, star of Helpless (2012) and Misbehavior (2016).

The story itself is a picaresque masterpiece: Tadao falls in love with pub worker Connie, money is scarce, times are desperate, the yakuza are always just a phone call away, and Sai still somehow manages to render the parking lots of Tokyo at golden hour more romantic than a moonlit walk under the Eiffel Tower. And yet, despite the comic hijinks, the winding and introspective driving reprieves between action-packed episodes effortlessly capture the imagined daily grind of a Tokyo cabbie in a dangerously glamorous light. These vignettes preempt by five years that long, meandering route driving through New Jersey turnpikes in HBO’s critically acclaimed The Sopranos, letting viewers breathe, ruminate, and wonder what Tadao’s life might bring next, promising certainty in no regard except that he himself does not know what the road may bring. The transience of life itself—as zainichi in Japan, but also as human being in the world—somehow feels like closure.

(Ania Tropnikova)
Nest Egg

PLT:
Tashiro Zennosuke becomes president of Meiwa Trading Company when he marries Atsuko, a relative of the former president. But Zennosuke is timid and has to rely on the president’s daughter Michiko, who helps him get through a shareholders’ meeting about the company’s union troubles. However, the former president’s widow learns of Zennosuke’s drunken party antics and urges him to behave more like a company president. As Zennosuke tries to make himself more “president-like,” other company employees plot to take his place at the helm of the company.

COMMENTARY:
Nest Egg is the first installment of over thirty entries in the popular Company President series of Tōhō Studios’ workplace film comedies—the longest running and arguably most important series of the postwar “salaryman comedy” genre films. It was preceded by the two Third Class Executive films (both 1952) that featured much of the same cast. Nest Egg, one of two entries directed by Chiba Yasuki, establishes much of the skeletal framework of what will form the bones of the often-strict Company President formula: the eponymous president, played by Morishige Hisaya, aloof and seemingly unserious, chases after women while his loyal righthand man, played by Kobayashi Keiju, endeavors diligently to get his president to focus on the work at hand and sabotage his constant attempts at adultery. In the end, despite his priorities, the president inevitably fails in adultery but saves the day in business.

After the end of the American occupation and the beginning of Japan’s postwar economic miracle, the Japanese social and economic order was met with significant and turbulent transformations. One of the most conspicuous developments in Japanese society was the re-emergence of a burgeoning middle-class of “salarymen,” white-collar workers who occupied what might be thought as an intermediary and ambivalent class position between labor and management. In particular, the figure of the salaryman came to occupy for Japan a position of what some scholars have termed hegemonic masculinity. The salaryman represented everything Japan supposedly became in the post-war era: pacifistic, economically industrious, committed to providing financially for a heteronormative nuclear family that would eagerly use surplus income on tourism, consumer spending, and luxury goods. Salaryman comedies—in poking fun at and humanizing executives like Morishige’s character—embodied for many the new democratic spirit of the times by breaking down the strict and authoritarian hierarchies of the prewar.

But the economic developments of the postwar were not without conflict: Tōhō was the site of a massive labor dispute that lasted from 1946 to 1948 and resulted in government and S.C.A.P-supported intervention with a large and highly militarized police presence forcibly evacuating strikers from their occupation of the Kinuta studio. It is then likely not a coincidence that Tōhō, given that the studio was at the center of one of the most consequential and visible labor disputes in postwar history, became perhaps the biggest producer of films that congenially rehabilitate the management class by rendering it as flawed but loveable protagonists of whacky hijinks-filled comedies.

One way to work through these problems is by thinking through the issue of the “corporate family.” Managerial familism had been a business management philosophy practiced in Japan since at least the 1920s, but with postwar cultural shifts to the logic of the family, Nest Egg and its progeny of the Company President series of films represent a fascinating intervention in the new cultural norms of “family” both at the office and at the home. Do the president’s victories in aiding his corporate family absolve his philandering failings toward his home family? In a rare moment during the sequel to this film, Kobayashi’s character must be coaxed back to work after tendering his resignation (fed up with the president’s antics) with a night of drinking and fraternal bonding with the company president. On the one hand, one imagines that this type of representation, where first an employee is capable of asserting his own agency and control over his own destiny, and second where he is able to horizontally and democratically fraternize with his superiors, would not have been possible in the prewar. But the serial comedy format has its own demands: can characters truly control their own destinies when they must reprise their roles dozens of times?
(Adam Silverman)
Gambler’s Luck

PLOT:

Gambler’s Luck follows a year in the lives of the outsiders and laborers who live in an impoverished nagaya (rowhouse) in the San’ya neighborhood of Edo. The film gives a glimpse of the humor and struggles of their precarious daily lives. Among the residents are Kuma, a plasterer by trade and neighborhood leader, his beautiful sister Sei, a rose among thorns, and Genbei, a stubborn but kindly rent-collector. The characters deal with a number of incidents, including the wealthy daimyō’s covetous pursuit of Sei, a fight with the landlord over rent increases, and a harsh winter.

COMMENTARY:

Yamada Yōji’s early film already bears many recognizable hallmarks of his intensely popular Tora-san series, It’s Tough to be a Man, a 48-film long extravaganza featuring a hapless but indefatigable bachelor (Atsumi Kiyoshi) that still retains the Guinness World Record for the longest-running movie series starring a single actor. Just as in that future series, in Gambler’s Luck one finds a colorful cast of tenement housing denizens, a beautiful “Madonna” (Baishō Chieko, costar of the Tora-san films), pranks, love, and even the future Tora-san himself, with Atsumi appearing as a cremator towards the end of the film. Gambler’s Luck shows Yamada perfecting the art of bringing Tenmei-era Edo alive, not as the space of samurai and dōjō clashes, but as the place where many commoners lived, struggled and laughed just trying to get by.

Yamada was a great admirer of rakugo, Japan’s traditional art of sit-down storytelling, and constructed this film out of several classic rakugo stories. The main story of Gambler’s Luck tracks a popular rakugo tale, “Sanma Fire,” sanma being the Pacific saury, a skinny fish known today for an entire festival dedicated to its charcoal grilling in Miyagi (and featuring rakugo performances of this tale). The fish emits an unusual amount of smoke, which proves pivotal for evading authorities during illicit fire starting. The tale of “Sanma Fire” generally involves an unhappy landlord whose tenants are finally obliged to pick up the discarded eaten clam shells posing a hazard to bare feet around the tenement, which the landlord will then use to make medicine for the harsher months. A tenement-related adage from the tale obtains: “a landlord is the same as a parent, and a renter is the same as a child,” and so it goes for the residents of Gambler’s Luck, as a watchful “parent”—the landlord’s dispatcher, Genbei—must endure the hijinks of “children” all through spring, summer, fall and winter. The main conflicts center around an unreasonable older brother (Hana Hajime of the Crazy Cats music comedy group) and his troubled younger sister (Baishō). Genbei’s famous sternness is made delightful and hilarious by a set of comically large glasses apposite to the times, magnifying his eyes into oblivion and inducing a sleepy stupor on his misbehaving “children” despite an imposing voice. Ultimately, he puts his tenants’ interests above those of the master of the house (played by Tanabe Yasuo), and protects them.

Rakugo enthusiasts will delight in Yamada’s romp—here one finds not only “Sanma fire,” but other beloved Edo classics: “Rakuda” (a story of a tenement resident who dies after eating poisonous blowfish), “Tsukiotoshi” (a certain contest in a pool to demonstrate sexual prowess), and “Golden Mochi” (the story of the origin of golden rice cakes), to name a few. As one Japanese viewer said, he has “never seen any movie that made him feel as good as this one,” a stark contrast to the usually uncompromisingly tragic depictions of people near poverty, such as in Shindō Kaneto’s The Ditch (1954) or Kurosawa Akira’s Dodes’kaden (1970). Yamada’s masterful storytelling generated legions of fans who wished that the characters of Gambler’s Luck might also be propelled into their own 48-film adventure. Sadly, it was not to be, but watching this film, it is not difficult to imagine each tenant living a vibrant adventure somewhere off screen and far away. For now, we will just have to enjoy spending only ninety-one minutes with them.

(Ania Tropnikova)
PLOT:
Sachie has left Japan to open a diner in Helsinki serving Japanese “soul food.” However, she has yet to attract a single customer. One day, a young Finnish man appears asking about the lyrics to a Japanese television anime. Her quest to remember the words leads her to Midori, a traveler from Japan who not only knows the song but eventually joins Sachie at the diner. The pair are later joined by another Japanese traveler, the mysterious Masako. Gradually, the diner begins to attract more customers and interesting characters.

COMMENTARY:
After studying for six years at the University of Southern California, Ogigami Naoko experienced reverse culture shock when trying to start her career in Japan, an experience that informed her feature-length debut, Yoshino’s Barber Shop (2004). After a sour experience on the set of her next film, Love Is Five Seven Five (2005), Ogigami felt depressed about continuing to work in Japan. The opportunity to make a film in Finland seemed like an antidote and it is tempting to see Ogigami in the main characters of Kamome Diner, three Japanese women who have shed their past burdens in Japan to live in the eternal summer sun of Helsinki, Finland.

Kamome Diner is sometimes described as an iyashi (healing or soothing) film, a genre popular in the early 2000s that featured leisurely-paced narratives of people existing in aesthetically pleasing and calming locations. For Japanese audiences, Finland was certainly an ideal site for iyashi: the country is portrayed in Japanese media as a place where people live in touch with nature, at a leisurely pace, and surrounded by simple, clean designs. However, while Kamome Diner is credited with contributing to growing consumer interest in Scandinavian fashion and design, the iyashi of the film comes from its offbeat humor. The repetitions and syncopations of situations and mise-en-scène—as well as punctuations of surreal reality—induce a Bergsonian laughter that causes a “momentary anesthesia of the heart,” such as when the trio of local Finnish women who stop and stare through the window as the diner’s staff inexplicably grows (“Look! There’s another one. This one’s bigger.”); and Masako’s endless (and possibly imaginary?) phone calls to the airline about her lost (MacGuffin) luggage.

A film about a diner offering Japanese food in a foreign land could easily have turned into a showcase of the wonders of washoku, Japanese cuisine. The film features many mouth-watering scenes of food preparation (the work of food stylist Iijima Nami) and Midori’s tears at Sachie’s home-cooked meal seems to affirm some ineffable quality of Japanese food. However, when a customer demands Koskenkorva (a Finnish spirit), Sachie is ready with a glass. In Kamome Diner, people are just as likely to sit down together for coffee and alcohol as they are to eat its distinctly Japanese offerings of onigiri or grilled salmon. Bonds are formed not in the name of platitudes like cultural exchange, but simply because Kamome Diner provides a space for gathering and coexisting. As Sachie explains to Midori who advises her to put more effort into promoting the diner, “I don’t want to cater to homesick Japanese or Finns who are after stereotypes like sake or sushi…. I want passers-by to drop in and eat.”

(David Baasch)
Susume! Jagāzu: tekizen jōriku
進め!ジャガーズ 敵前上陸
Year: 1968
Studio: Shōchiku (Ōfuna)
Director: Maeda Yōichi
Script: Kobayashi Nobuhiko (as Nakahara Yumihiko), Maeda Yōichi
Cast: The Jaguars (Okamoto Shin, Miya Yukio, Morita Mikio, Miyazaki Koichi, Satō Yasuji), Nakamura Akiko (Aki), Uchida Asao (Kitō), Ozaki Nana (Yukiko), San’yūtei Enraku V (Detective)

Plot:
Shin, the lead singer of the “Group Sounds” band The Jaguars, stumbles upon a plot for world domination by Kitō. Shin, however, has bigger problems: love. As Shin and the band try to evade Kitō’s attempts to kill them, Shin meets the girl of his dreams, Yukiko, who happens to be Kitō’s daughter under orders to lure Shin into a trap. Yukiko, however, betrays her father and is killed as punishment, enraging Shin. She reveals the secret location of her father’s base on Iwo Jima and The Jaguars set off for enemy territory to avenge her death. On the island they encounter a sequestered Imperial Japanese soldier who is unaware that the war has ended. With the help of the soldier, The Jaguars must find a way to stop Kitō.

Commentary:
In 1968, a reader of the film magazine Eiga hyōron remarked that Make Way for the Jaguars! seemed to be responding to a line from Oshima Nagisa’s Three Resurrected Drunkards—“Don’t mess around!” (motto majime ni yare)—by doing just the opposite. The films were shown together on a double-bill of “Ground Sounds” films (a genre that combined Japanese pop and rock and roll) by two directors who had come from Shōchiku. Maeda Yōichi, the director of Make Way for the Jaguars!, had been a screenwriter and assistant director to many of the “Shōchiku New Wave” directors, including Ōshima, and was positioned to be another “New Wave” filmmaker. However, studio head Kido Shirō stopped promoting the Shōchiku New Wave and by 1964 most of the directors associated with it had left the studio. Maeda’s first film, Nippon Paradise (1962), a postwar history of a fictional red light district, displayed a critical sharpness that recalled the early New Wave films. Maeda claims that Kido accused him of “trying to take the studio back to the days of the ‘New Wave’!” It is not surprising that Maeda would later be described as the zantō (defeated remnant) of the New Wave. Film scholar Yomota Inuhiko describes Make Way for the Jaguars! as “a strange work…Japan’s first Godardian slapstick parody.” This was in part the result of its co-writer, Kobayashi Nobuhiko, a prolific writer, critic, and avid film fan who outlined a script that parodied the Beatles, James Bond, and Godard (among many others). Gags are quick and pop cultural references plentiful, thoroughly demonstrating Kobayashi’s belief that film comedies should be showy and speedy. However, the last act set on Iwo Jima makes the comparison with Ōshima’s film seem like more than just a coincidence of programming. Where Oshima’s film is arguably about the “post” of postwar Japan, especially the Vietnam War, Maeda focuses on the “war” of postwar Japan, that is, the ghosts of the Asia-Pacific War. This forgotten history is embodied in the appearance of the lone Imperial soldier hiding on Iwo Jima, once the site of a decisive defeat for the Empire of Japan but here home to a criminal organization that has the power to influence world leaders and is, ironically, headed by a Japanese overlord. The soldier listens in shock as The Jaguars explain how Japan is now a peaceful nation that has renounced the use of military force. However, they must take up arms to defeat Kitō, and in the end it is this relic of the past, tossed into the present (and the narrative) like a grenade, who clinches victory as the The Jaguars watch from a safe distance. The Jaguars are stand-ins for a generation without firsthand experience of war that can only connect with the soldier through play, jumping and laughing as they shoot rifles and dodge landmines. Even raising the Japanese flag on Iwo Jima is only a playful imitation. It is not clear whether Maeda is criticizing the generation The Jaguars represent for their naivety (Maeda himself was only eleven when the war ended), but in any case in Make Way for the Jaguars! he does mess around and, as the aforementioned Eiga hyōron reader noted, he seems to have playfully “betrayed” audiences who came not to be reminded of Japan’s wartime past, but for the band and its music.

(David Baasch)
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