The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity

Catherine Russell
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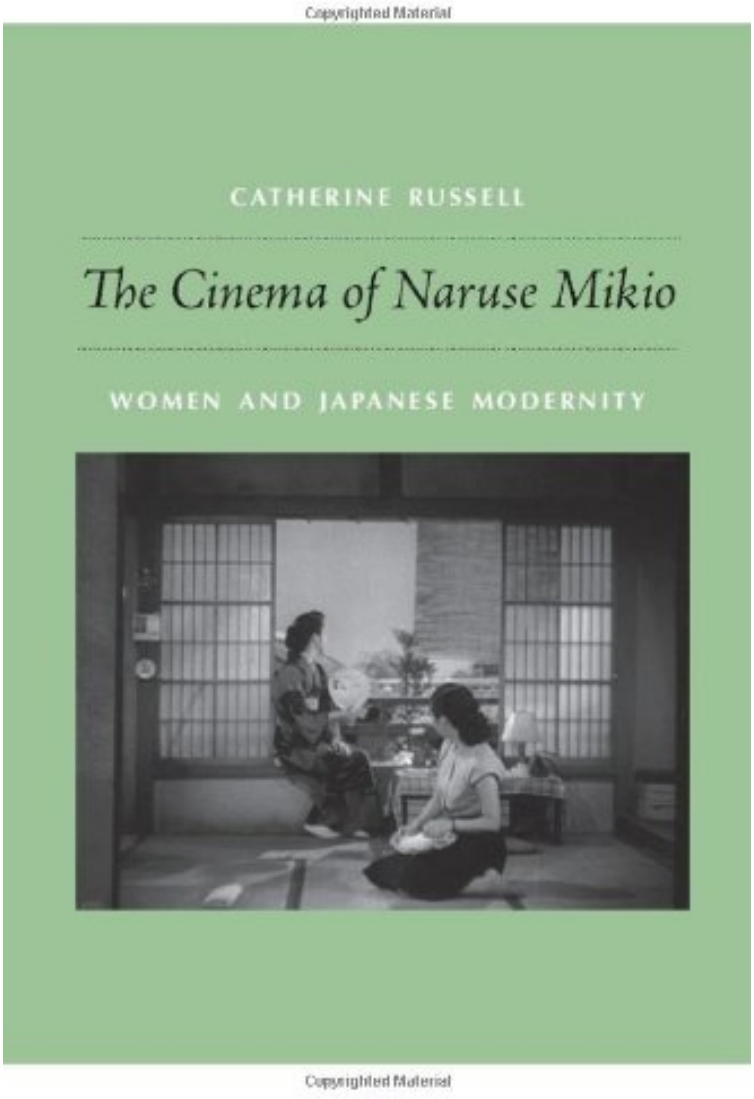

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Catherine Russell : The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Impressive Overivew of an Underrated Master of CinemaBy Patrick Mc CoyThis year I decided to delve into Catherine Russell's study of under-rated Japanese director Mikio Naruse, The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity (2008). After her introduction, "Introduction: The Auteur As Salaryman," she takes on the silent films in the first chapter, "The Silent Films: Women In The City, 1930-1934."

She explains that the classical cinema emerging in Naruse's films of the 30s is predicated on melodrama as the popular form specific to the experience of modern life. Russell writes that no other director provided as complex figures of modern women in this decade as did Naruse with his films about "new women", professional women, cafe waitresses, wives, and daughters-in-law. The second group following the silent films is "Naruse at P.C.L.: Toward A Japanese Classical Cinema, 1935-1937." This section discussed the following twelve films: Three Sisters with Maiden Hearts, The Actress and the Poet, Wife Be Like a Rose!, Five Men in the Circus, The Girl in the Rumor, Tochuken Kumoemon, The Road I Travel with You, Morning's Tree-Lined Street , Feminine Melancholy, Avalanche, Learn from Experience. Of these I have only previous seen, Wife Be Like a Rose!. All of these are available on DVD, You Tube, or other means.Russell then looks at the thirteen films Naruse made between 1938 and 1945 at the height of the China and Pacific wars in which the government held strict control of all film production in Chapter Three, "Not a Monumental Cinema: Wartime Vernacular, 1938-1945." Thus there was an agreement within the film industry to "elevate" Japanese film culture above decadent foreign tendencies imported from foreign films. Of the thirteen, eleven are extant. The two missing films are Shanghai Moon (1941) and Until Victory Day (1945) sound like the most overt examples of kokusaku eiga (national policy films). In the last two years when he produced two films, the total national output was only 26. There were period films such as Tsuruhachi and Tsurujiro (1938), The Song Lantern (1943), The Way of Drama (1944), and A Tale of Archers at the Sanjusangendo (1945) as well as contemporary films like The Whole Family Works (1939), Sincerity (1939), Traveling Actors (1940), A Face From the Past (1941), This Happy Life (1941), Hideko the Bus Conductor (1941), and Mother Never Dies (1942).Chapter Four is called "The Occupation Years: Cinema, Democracy, And Japanese Kitsch, 1945-1952." This period is known to be his weakest partly because he did not work with the best actresses or writers until 1951. Then he directed Kinuyo Tanaka in Ginza Cosmetics, Mieko Takamine in Dancing Girl and Setsuko Hara in Repast. In 1951 and 1952 he adapted works by Yasuanri Kawabata, Junichiro Tanizaki, and Fumiko Hayashi. The films of this era were: A Descendant of Taro Urashima (1946), Both You And I (1946), Spring Awakens (1947), Even Parting Is Enjoyable (1947), Professor Ishinaka (1949), The Angry Street (1949), White Beast (1949), The Battle of Roses (1949), Ginza Cosmetics (1951), Dancing Girl (1951), Repast (1951), and Okuni and Gohei (1952). These thirteen films made during the American occupation included an eclectic array of styles and genres from "Democracy pictures" to literary adaptations, gave insight into occupation culture, and he frequently worked against genre conventions. Many critics who felt that Naruse had a slump through the 40s saw the female prison film, White Beast, to be the lowest point. It is interesting to note that the last film of this period was a historical film, that Russell suspects may have been inspired by Kurosawa's success at the Venice Film Festival in 1951 with Rashomon. And it was also interesting that Russell drew a comparison between Naruse and Italian director Roberto Rosellini (of which I have seen a few films) as both the directors had a focus on female protagonists and developed some strong women characters in the postwar era. Despite the critical consensus that this period was a slump, Russell points out that Naruse was working through fundamental issues of visual representation that any cultural renewal demands."The Japanese Woman's Films of the 1950s, 1952-1958," Chapter Five, it is during this period of time Naruse directed fourteen films (Mother, Lightning, Husband and Wife, Wife, Older Brother, Younger Sister, Sound of the Mountain, Late Chrysanthemums, Floating Clouds, Sudden Rain, A Wife's Heart, Flowing, Untamed, and Anzukko) of which half of them placed in the Kinema Junpo top-ten lists. And it is during this period in which he became one of the greatest film makers in the world. Russell has chosen this particular time period, because Mother (1952) was the first film after the end of the occupation and Anzukko (1958) is essentially the last he made in academy aspect ratio. Most of these films were based on literary sources published within twenty years of the films which helped Naruse develop his cinema style: subtle patterns of editing, lighting, performance style, and set design. Russell points out that Naruse's inserts of still shots differ from Ozu's in that shots of objects are almost always linked to the diegesis of the film and are essentially establishing shots rather than "pillow shots." Some elements of his style included quick editing, low camera angles for use with tatami mats, use of 360-degree space, and conventional "movie music" to emphasize melodramatic emotion. At this stage he was allowed to assemble his own staff of cinematographers, writers, and cast members which was associated with the star systems and allowed him to work with some of the top performers of the era such as: Toshiro Mifune, Machiko Kyo, Masayuki Mori, Ken Uehara, Hideko Takamine, So Yamamura, and Haruko Sugimura. One aspect Russell analyzes in the films is in terms of how architecture functions as a framing device.Chapter Six is called "Naruse in the 1960s: Stranded in Modernity, 1958-1967." This was a tough time for the film industry as film goers were drawn away to television. By 1965 half of all films produced were roman porno, or "pink movies": soft-core pornography. That being said the postwar peak occurred in 1960 in terms of films produced and active theaters. Despite Naruse's liberal politics he was removed from the "New Wave" generation because he didn't fully embrace the new attitudes and directness. For example, his refusal to offer narrative endings with strong messages reflected everything the New Wave was rebelling against. However, not all of Naruse's protagonists are victims, but survivors of a dysfunctional society. It is also a time where Naruse is trying to stay relevant to the changes in modern cinema and he experiments in ways that are anathema to his past methods by employing wide-screen, filming in color, and incorporating complex flashback scenes in his films. During this period he filmed some of his most impressive films such as Summer Clouds (1958),

When A Woman Ascends the Stairs (1960), Yearning (1964), and Scattered Clouds (1967). In Naruse's last decade he released 14 films for Toho that spanned a variety of genres and styles: Summer Clouds, Whistling in Kotan (1959), When A Woman Ascends the Stairs, Daughters, Wives And A Mother (1960), Evening Stream (1960), The Approach of Autumn (1960), As A Wife, As A Woman (1961), A Woman's Place (1961), A Wanderer's Notebook (1961), A Woman's Story aka Horoki (1963), Yearning, The Stranger Within A Woman (1966), Hit And Run (1966), and Scattered Clouds. Russell's book is ideal in her research and specific critical analysis of each particular film and the context of when they were produced and what was going on in Japan at the time. it is extremely insightful and informative about the least well-known Japanese master of the Four Greats (Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Kurosawa).1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. It is sad to see Naruse used for this professor's academic agendaBy naniwaI can't believe a cinema academic can make so many mistakes page after page.The plot summaries are often not only wrong but very wrong.It is sad to see Naruse used for this professor's academic agenda.Would only buy for reference but take everything with a pinch of salt.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Terrific study of an important directorBy CraigRussell has given the English speaking world fantastic insight into Naruse's oeuvre and the climate in which he worked.Hopefully, this work will spur further interest in this phenomenal director's movies.

One of the most prolific and respected directors of Japanese cinema, Naruse Mikio (190569) made eighty-nine films between 1930 and 1967. Little, however, has been written about Naruse in English, and much of the writing about him in Japanese has not been translated into English. With The Cinema of Naruse Mikio, Catherine Russell brings deserved critical attention to this under-appreciated director. Besides illuminating Naruses contributions to Japanese and world cinema, Russells in-depth study of the director sheds new light on the Japanese film industry between the 1930s and the 1960s.Naruse was a studio-based director, a company man renowned for bringing films in on budget and on time. During his long career, he directed movies in different styles of melodrama while displaying a remarkable continuity of tone. His films were based on a variety of Japanese literary sources and original scripts; almost all of them were set in contemporary Japan. Many were womens films. They had female protagonists, and they depicted womens passions, disappointments, routines, and living conditions. While neither Naruse or his audiences identified themselves as feminist, his films repeatedly foreground, if not challenge, the rigid gender norms of Japanese society. Given the complex historical and critical issues surrounding Naruses cinema, a comprehensive study of the director demands an innovative and interdisciplinary approach. Russell draws on the critical reception of Naruse in Japan in addition to the cultural theories of Harry Harootunian, Miriam Hansen, and Walter Benjamin. She shows that Naruses movies were key texts of Japanese modernity, both in the ways that they portrayed the changing roles of Japanese women in the public sphere and in their depiction of an urban, industrialized, mass-media-saturated society.

The Cinema of Naruse Mikio presents not only a deft and subtle run-through of the world of an important auteur, but also a virtual encapsulation of the intellectual history of Japanese cinema during its most important period, the 1930s60s. Catherine Russell contextualizes Naruse in the commercial situation in which he worked and in the historical, social, political, and intellectual project of mid-twentieth-century Japan. I came away firmly believing that Naruse was more attuned to how modernity was leaving its indelible marks on Japanese women than any other director of classical Japanese cinema. For students of feminist film criticism, Russells book is an absolute must.David Desser, author of Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema