

Silver-screen Multiculturalism

By Toshihisa Nagasaka

The world is moving toward globalization and multiculturalism. With the startling advances in telecommunications, transportation and tourism, companies and individuals alike are active and interacting across national borders, and there are signs that the world itself is moving toward the formation of a single, global community. Even Japan, homogeneous and the least adept at coexisting with other cultures, is experiencing this internationalization. Already Japan is home to many people from the other nations of Asia and elsewhere living and working side by side with Japanese.

What are the implications of this expanding interaction among peoples from different countries and cultures? With the rapid expansion in the international flow of people, this new global environment will produce cultural commonalities and, at the same time, enhance the value of each country's distinctive cultural attributes. Not only will the future be a time when people respect each other's cultures and develop a common set of human values (e.g. equality and freedom) through living together with people from different cultures, it may well be a time of creating new cultural facets. In this sense, the world is entering a time of multiculturalism.

What does it mean for people from different cultures to live together in mutual respect and to create new cultural facets? In fact, this is precisely what has happened in the United States. And in answer to the question of how we are to learn about multiculturalism and experience the multicultural lifestyle ahead, movies would seem to be the best response.

A movie is essentially a series of images, the main characters are clearly identifiable by race and class, and the fact that the cultural setting is sharply defined means that the film expresses a distinctive culture. At the same time, movies have become international cultural works, and outstanding movies are

recognized as such and have an emotional impact on viewers from all cultures. It is this easy accessibility and transcultural power that gives movies a universal message not bound to any one culture. The best movies are those that incorporate features from a particular culture into a universal message.

Quality of diversity

Movies played a significant role in the formation of multicultural America. For the new immigrants, movies outlined the structure of American society and planted the seeds of the American Dream; while for those who were already established in their new world, movies portrayed the later arrivals' struggle for survival and hence opened the channels of understanding and acceptance. In addition, American movies contributed to defining the new society and propagating shared American values.

Considering the historical role that movies have had in America, it is no wonder that American movies are currently

the most successful films in the world, for the underlying character of American movies is one of multiculturalism. Movie-making is premised on cultural and ethnic plurality, and each movie is steeped in this racial diversity before it reaches the screen.

By contrast, Japanese movies, while prospering in the postwar period when they explored the essence of the Japanese spirit, have gradually declined as prosperity led to internationalization. Why has Japan, which seems to make everything else so well, lost the ability to make good movies? The main reason is that we have stopped being introspective. With economic growth and internationalization, Japanese movie companies grew richer. Caught up in a kaleidoscope of consumption and offering films that only superficially portrayed new values and ideas, they lost touch with their true selves. Until we understand ourselves, we cannot possibly hope to understand the rest of the world. This is true whether the movie addresses Japanese or international themes. The essential loss is that Japa-



Comedian Hitoshi Ueki in a scene from the successful series of 1960s movies portraying the lives of Japanese workers.

Photo: Toho Ad Center K.K.

Photo: Shochiku K.K.



A frustrated salaryman vents his feelings in a scene from *Bakayaro!*

nese artists have been so caught up in forms that they have failed to discuss the underlying universal human issues.

Why have Japanese movies lost sight of the Japanese people? There is a long history of Japanese movies about the poor working stiff on the company treadmill (called "salarymen"), and retracing the development of these movies provides an answer to this question. Salaryman movies are a genre peculiar to Japan and a genre that does not exist in the United States. American movies about business are usually success stories or love stories, and there are very few that deal with the salaryman's joys, pains and fantasies. *Wall Street*, *Working Girl* and *Dallas* are just some of the American movies about business that center on love and ambition. Even *Nine to Five*, while ostensibly about the office worker's world, is really a social-message film about sexual harassment.

In postwar Japan, however, a genre of movies sprung up focusing on the worker's emotions. One of the earliest was Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* in 1952. Portending the phenomenon of hard-working employees that sustained Japan's emerging rapid growth, *Ikiru* spoke directly to such workers, counseling them to retain

their humanity. Kurosawa's artistic genius was evident not just in the excellence of the movie itself but in its foresight.

As the Japanese worker sunk deeper into workaholic in the 1960s, a series of satirical movies starring Hitoshi Ueki as a salaryman who makes all the right moves and moves up to run the company (a sort of office gamesmanship series) allowed people to laugh at the ridiculousness of their predicament. In the same vein, the actor Hisaya Morishige found success with a series of comedies about the various people around the company president.

Clearly, the salaryman was the main player in any portrayal of postwar Japan or the Japanese people. It was the salarymen who kept the wheels of the economy turning, and their importance was a distinctive feature of postwar Japanese society. Observing the salaryman was thus the most direct route to understanding the spirit motivating Japan. This was because salarymen were the working class, the mass culture, and the group most in need of a fantasy world.

However, the rapid growth plateaued with the oil crises of the 1970s, and directors turned their backs on the ordinary workers as Japan began to encounter new

challenges and strive for a new identity. It is no accident that this coincided with an industry-wide decline as Japanese movies were increasingly not up to international standards. The salaryman movies of the 1970s, such as *Kurobe no Taiyo* (the story of the toils of the workers who built the Kurobe Dam) were funded by companies and amounted to little more than company PR films. They were not concerned with the workers as people.

Salaryman abandoned

By the 1980s, Japanese directors had completely abandoned the salaryman's plight, the core element of Japanese society, and the price they paid was that Japanese films lost their strength and persuasiveness and turned instead to light-hearted, empty-headed movies that pandered to young audiences. Recently, however, there has been a slight comeback in such salaryman movies as *Shaso*, *Bakayaro!*, *Kaisha Monogatari* and *Ageman*.

In *Kaisha Monogatari*, we see a group of salarymen who have reached retirement age and undergo the accompanying loneliness and quest to find new meaning



Promotional pamphlet from *Ageman*, made by popular director Juzo Itami, depicting a worker's fantasy.

in life. The story line is simple: a group of friends are slated for retirement. Since they had all played at jazz clubs when they were young, they decide to give a jazz concert on their last day at work. And in planning and practicing for the concert, they rediscover the joy of living. In one scene, Ueki, who had played the lead in a number of salaryman hits in the 1960s, yells in a drunken outburst, "We're the people who made this country what it is."

The main character in the fourth of the *Bakayaro!* episodes – *Eigo ga Nanda* – features a businessman who has unexpectedly been assigned to Chicago. He is forced into an intensive English course, mocked by other employees because of his poor English, and finally, fed up at the other people's infatuation with English, yells, "You can take your English and shove it!" Directed by the popular Juzo Itami, *Ageman* is a worker's fantasy that is similar to American movies in many ways. All of these films, however, would have been appropriate more than a decade ago and today seem a little bit behind the times. Despite this, there is hope for Japanese film-making if these new works signal a revival of the salaryman movie genre.

As Japan has gotten richer, Japanese money has started financing American movies. Nor is this trend limited only to investment. Japanese directors are also starting to tie up with overseas companies and to work on movies aimed not just at the Japanese market but at foreign audiences as well. Recent examples include Kurosawa's *Dreams* and Mitsuo Yanagimachi's *Shadow of China*. And Yoshimi Ishikawa's original *Strawberry Road* is scheduled to be released this fall. Itami is also working with American partners.

Kurosawa's *Dreams*, for example, was financed by the Spielberg Group, although it is hard to see why an internationally acclaimed director such as Kurosawa cannot get Japanese funding. *Shadow of China* is a Japanese rendition of how Japanese people view the Chinese, and it frankly exposes the Japanese biases toward the Chinese people.

It is still too early to tell whether or not the current crop of Japanese scriptwriters

and directors will be able to turn out world-class movies. Kurosawa, of course, is already an acknowledged international celebrity. However, such special cases aside, Japanese filmhood seems beset with structural problems. Although there is great international interest in what type of nation Japan seeks to be, why Japan is the way it is, and where Japan is headed, these questions are left unanswered and Japanese films seem incapable of addressing these issues.

It would be most unfortunate if the frustration that has built up over not having any answers to these questions were to lead to a nationalistic backlash. Most Japanese movies do not address universal issues, and most of the films appeal only to a certain segment of the teen market. The Japanese movies' shortcomings as an expressive medium may simply be the natural result of their unwillingness to ask the deeper introspective questions.

Respect for others

Yet simple introspection will not be enough in the multicultural era. Rather, it will be necessary not only to observe ourselves and our culture but also to address new issues in the creation of new cultural aspects for the future. What are these issues? As this new era approaches with its unbridled international flow of people, we must begin outlining new modes of coexistence and must lay the foundations for new cultural creation. Living in the multicultural era will require both self-respect for your own culture and individuality, and the ability to have respect for and understanding of other cultures and peoples.

What kind of philosophy must we have in this multicultural era? When people from different cultures meet and interact, what philosophy or values will make it possible for them to avoid falling prey to prejudices and seek understanding as they walk side by side respecting their differences? Surely mankind has some experience with this in its long and varied history and has found some framework for this. Doubters have only to recall Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream.

American movies are continually pro-

viding fresh perspectives on multiculturalism. The American experience produces movies such as *Betrayed*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Talk Radio* and *Do the Right Thing* because American society is truly multicultural.

It was King's dream that a multicultural society could be created that would respect minority cultures, eradicate discrimination, and provide the framework for mutual coexistence, and the United States has had considerable experience in testing and refining these values. When I think about the coming multicultural era, I am reassured by the fact that we already have the example of the Rev. King's dream.

King succeeded Gandhi as a preacher of nonviolence, and while Gandhi showed us how a powerless but absolute majority can throw off a tyrannical minority, King demonstrated how a powerless minority can stand up to the established majority. He taught that the culture of a powerless minority has the same intrinsic value as that of a powerful majority.

As such, King's ideals apply not only to their American context but stand as imperatives for the new era of multiculturalism. With the advent of globalization, America's experiences in the 1960s and 1970s will be the experiences of all human beings living everywhere on this planet. In this sense, American movies will continue to serve as cultural guideposts for international society. Thus I hope that Sony's purchase of Columbia Pictures, for example, is not simply a straight business deal in which a Japanese firm bought an American movie company. Rather, I hope this signals that Japanese companies are ready to start helping American films present their universal message and to become truly global products. ■

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