

Asian Cinema
Volume 30 Number 1

© 2019 Intellect Ltd Review. English language. doi: 10.1386/ac.30.1.149_5

REVIEW

***DIALECTICS OF THE GODDESS IN JAPANESE AUDIOVISUAL CULTURE,* LORENZO J. TORRES HORTELANO (ED.) (2018)**

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 161 pp.,
ISBN 978-1-49857-014-5, h/bk, £60.00
ISBN 978-1-49857-015-2, e-book, £60.00

Reviewed by Marcos P. Centeno Martín, University of London

ABSTRACT

Dialectics of the Goddess in Japanese Audiovisual Culture presents a study of how female figures linked to the idea of Goddess have been represented by the Japanese screen industry. The originality of this work lies in proposing an analysis of the representation of renewed mythical female figures in the contemporary screen industry. Thus, contributors highlight the role of the media as a powerful machine for creating modern myths and demonstrate how Japan has produced a strong iconography of female deities and other pseudo-religious entities. The book assesses how these female figures, coming from the Japanese cultural tradition, have been transgressed, perverted and updated metaphorically or literally in media characters.

KEYWORDS

Goddess
Japanese media
myths
deities
female characters
gender

Lorenzo Torres Hortelano has assembled a collection of essays in which both senior and younger researchers provide a pertinent approach to the study of how female figures, which, in several ways are linked to the idea of Goddess, have been represented by the Japanese screen industry, mainly in, but not restricted to, films. Scholars have increasingly become aware of the necessity of tackling Japanese cultural production from a gender perspective to critically assess representations of women, gender inequalities and patriarchy (Martínez 2014, 1998; Sunim 1999; Stickland 2007; Willis

and Murpy-Shigematsu 2008). There is considerable literature that focuses on the place of matriarchal divinities in Japan (Matsumae 1978; Hori et al. 2000; Teeuwen 2003). Blacker's (1945) work on the existence of primitive goddesses in our collective unconscious marked the beginning of a scholarly debate on the ways in which female *kami* pervade modern Japanese society (Graves 1948; Blacker 2005; Nakamura 2002; Shimazono 1979). However, none of these manuscripts engages in the formal analysis of goddesses in modern media, which is precisely the main contribution of this volume. Torres Hortelano proposes a methodological approach focusing on textual analysis whose goals are twofold: first, assessing the multiples nuances in which Patriarchy is represented in Japanese media, and second, calling into question the assumption that modernity has produced a more atheist and secular world, and instead, claiming that media show a wider range of faiths and beliefs than ever.

Dialectics of the Goddess in Japanese Audiovisual Culture provides a valuable approach from the perspective of gender studies, whose originality lies in proposing a dialectical analysis of female characters shifting from research on primitive goddesses to the renewal of mythical female figures in the contemporary screen industry. The authors seem to confirm Torres Hortelano's hypothesis put forward in the introduction by highlighting the role of the media as a powerful machine for creating modern myths. They have demonstrated how Japan has produced particularly strong iconography of goddesses, female deities and other pseudo-religious entities that are somehow inheritors of Japanese religious syncretism. Throughout their chapters, the contributors put such goddesses in relation to Japanese cultural tradition, indicating the continuity of mythical figures even if they have been transgressed, perverted and updated, metaphorically or literally in ghostly and divine female media characters.

This article is the product of a conference that the group Trama y Fondo, devoted to visual text analysis, organized at the University Complutense de Madrid in 2015, although some contributors were included in the project later. Following Torres Hortelano's perspective, this volume analyses femininity, archetypes and the creation and renovation of female figures in Japanese audio-visual texts through the representation of characters that somehow come to challenge, dismantle or update images of goddess in Japan. Throughout its eight chapters, contributors provide nuance helpful for better understanding how modern characters in contemporary Japanese media maintain a sometimes direct, sometimes ambiguous – or even contradictory – relation to Japanese cultural tradition. Thus, they bring fresh air to the study of Japanese female myths and tropes.

The persistence of sacred elements in tales created by modern authors is illustrated by Linda C. Ehrlich in the first chapter, 'Kannon-sama and the spirit of compassion in Japanese cinema'. By focusing on some *jidaigeki* ('period films') by Kawamoto, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, Ehrlich identifies Buddhist concepts and relates protagonists' paths towards compassion to the Goddess of Mercy (Bodhisattva), known as *Kannon* in Japan, which is shown as possessing the qualities of a mother-goddess. The text starts with a film with no women at all, Akira Kurosawa's *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (1945) in which she finds the depiction of *ningen no nasake* ('human compassion') in several scenes. Also, the *obasute*, the act of carrying the elderly to a peak of a sacred mountain to die, represented in both versions of *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983), drives Ehrlich to find the three elements that compassion requires according to

Buddhist thought: egolessness, emptiness (*shunyata*) and communication. In addition, Ehrlich studies how Mizoguchi represents the path towards compassion in the female protagonists of *Genroku Chūshingura* (1947) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954). Finally, the author interrogates the symbolism of Buddha in the *Book of the Dead* (2005) by Kawamoto Kihachirō.

Sybil A. Thornton examines how films also echo the multiple faiths proliferating across modern Japan in Chapter 2, 'Suffering and deification: The Goddess in *Night Drum*'. Thornton interrogates the representation of suffering in two films, Tadashi Imai's *Yoru no tsuzumi (Night Drum)* (1958) and Kobayashi Masaki's *Seppuku (Harakiri)* (1962), and proposes that they should be understood in relation to the creation of Japanese new religions from the first half of the nineteenth century until about the 1970s as the author notes that their founders are women who claimed to have experienced periods of spirit possession and consequently, deification through suffering. Thornton studies analogies with the oldest recorded case of spirit possession (*kamigakari*) and other stories of humans transformed into deities after great suffering. To Thornton, through situating the films in a context of religious reform, what connects the films with that religious background is the structure of possession as social or political victimization.

In Chapter 3, 'The profound desire of the goddess: Sexuality and politics in *The Insect Woman*', Irene González-López revisits the female role as a cultural, political and sexual construction in Imamura's film *The Insect Woman*. Gonzalez's hypothesis is that Imamura's protagonist represents the embodiment of a goddess, particularly the Mountain Goddess featured at the beginning of the film. Thus, Gonzalez retakes early studies of Imamura's work that have frequently implied an exceptional link between his female archetype and the divine spiritual world. However, González points out that the female protagonist is not depicted as a modern Shinto deity, but rather serves as a tool through which others can come to belong to a community and thus, the chapter also discusses the problem of post-war memory and identity and the ideological implications of Imamura's representation. While Imamura puts forward an alternative to hegemonic female archetypes, González maintains a critical approach, noting that what Imamura offers remains a stereotype or even a 'femininity' demanded by men and serving to assist an image of dominating masculinity.

Dolores P. Martinez discusses the idea that Japan has been more open to depicting strong female heroes than the West in Chapter 4 'Anime goddesses and their Hollywood transformations'. To this end, Martinez interrogates several kinds of goddess in anime productions, examining intertextual relations to Hollywood adaptations. This text warns the reader about a false premise; despite the pre-eminence of goddesses such as Amaterasu, there is no historical evidence to suggest that ancient Japan was a land of matriarchs and in fact, there are no documented matriarchies, i.e. societies in which women hold higher status and political power than men. This observation leads Martinez to affirm that Matriarchy is a myth and worshipped goddesses are exceptions, often becoming the other side of the coin, witches, demonesses or avenging ghosts in both Japanese mythology and contemporary mass media.

After this necessary introduction, Martinez defends the idea that Japanese authors have been more willing to image powerful cyborg females, and supports her argument with examples taken from anime productions such as *Patlabor* (1988–94), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–96) and *Ghost in*

the Shell (1989–2015). Martinez questions whether these examples present a profound difference on ideas of female empowerment between Japan and the United States. By focusing her study on Napier's 'magical girls' – young and adolescent girls with superpowers – Martinez criticizes how they are aimed at a female audience for marketing purposes, and argues that the fan base to which girls with supernatural powers would appeal is a commonplace in the United States. Nevertheless, the chapter demonstrates that depictions of gender relations in Japan and the United States are somewhat different. While the strong woman in the West generally takes second place, as a helpmate or a female companion who falls in love with the hero, strong women in Japanese narrative culture seem to occupy a more important place. Martinez maintains her critical approach to the end, stating that in both cases, patriarchy is never undermined as, ironically, while mythologies seem to represent new ways of being male and female, they always end up re-establishing old patriarchal patterns. As a consequence, Martinez concludes that these modern imaginaries of myths are never as revolutionary as we would like them to be.

In Chapter 5 'Lost names, deviant attitudes, and the ether: Goddesses in contemporary Japanese audiovisuals', José Montaña examines the notion of divinity in *shōjo manga* anime, contemporary films and television series, featuring everyday schoolgirls and mothers with superhuman abilities. This text also raises contradictions on depiction of girls as god-like beings with the potential to unleash social revolution who are, however, developed as a male voyeuristic experience. Also, Montaña presents examples showing how media productions seem to project contemporary social concerns of male mistrust of women who are devoted to their professional careers and apparently neglecting their responsibilities as mothers. Montaña proposes that Shunji Iwai's films present an alternative to roles traditionally assigned to women, which could be traced to the manga developed by female authors from the 1960s.

Laura Montero presents a comparative analysis of the female protagonist in Takahata Isao's *Princess Kaguya* (2013) and that of the original story *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori Monogatari*), a popular fairy-tale of the early tenth-century in Chapter 6, 'The humanization of the goddess: Takahata Isao's *Princess Kaguya*'. Montero asserts that Takahata updates the story, incorporating imagery created in picture scrolls – *emaki* – from the Edo period and introduces a ferocious criticism of Japanese patriarchal society. The chapter provides insightful observations on how Takahata deconstructs the novella to focus on Kaguya's feelings, renewing this mythical figure by representing her as the victim of an oppressive society and reinforcing her human side. Montero proposes that Takahata's storytelling is in fact more closely linked to female writers from the 1970s, such as Ōba Minako, who reformulated traditional fairy tales by attacking patriarchy and the institution of marriage as a form oppressing Japanese women.

The persistence of traditional elements in modernity is explored by Víctor Navarro-Remesal in Chapter 7 'Goddesses in Japanese videogames: Tradition, gameplay, gender, and power'. Navarro-Remesal analyses how female protagonists are depicted in another kind of audio-visual text, contemporary video games, drawing on three case studies, *Okami* (2006), *Asura's Wrath* (2012) and *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (2011), to argue that the distinction between the traditional and the virtual world does not mark a break in the representation of goddesses and thus, video

games offer certain continuity with the cultural tradition in which they are created. The text engages in the contemporary discussion on the concept of *mukokuseki* ('statelessness'), claiming that Japaneseness in video games is a trait in motion. Thus, Navarro-Remesal defends that the specificities of Japanese videogames are due to a combination of contacts with the rest of Japanese folklore, other media and western influences. Navarro-Remesal identifies a variety of cultural references such as Buddhist and Ainu myths, demonstrating how these ludonarratives combine freedom of movement within more rigid cultural structures. The author also acknowledges that to an extent, these traditions have been updated by mirroring preoccupations of modern Japan, including those related to gender roles. According to Navarro-Remesal, this can be observed in contradictory representations of female characters as goddesses or sacred figures and as submissive servants.

Lorenzo Torres Hortelano concludes this volume with the last chapter, 'Ghostly goddesses in Japanese cinema', applying his textual analysis to one of the most sinister aspects of the divine femininities represented in media: female monsters that he defines as 'ghostly goddesses' featured in horror and fantasy films. Torres reviews the existence of these figures throughout the history of Japanese cinema in stories unfolded between the real and the imaginary, from the modern J-horror film *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) to the pre-war avant-garde work *A Page of Madness* (Teinosuke Kinugawa, 1926), seeking the origins of these characters in primitive goddesses such as Izanami.

Throughout the collected articles, the imagery of the potent or magical woman is critically analysed, revealing many of her contradictions, mainly related to the pervading male gaze and preservation of patriarchal systems of domination. Contributors present useful observations on how modern attitudes and anxieties regarding gender roles are portrayed, pinning down important points in the debate to nuance how these case studies project gender inequalities. Thus, *Dialectics of the Goddess in Japanese Audiovisual Culture* offers several points of departure for gender studies in the Japanese scene through textual analyses of contemporary media culture, demonstrating the coexistence of mythic and sacred traces in the secular representation of female figures. As a consequence, this volume becomes useful material for students of Japanese cinema and for those interested in Japanese mythologies, religion and visual culture, and gender studies.

REFERENCES

- Blacker, Carmen ([1975] 2005), *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, London: Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Graves, Robert (1948), *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Hori, Ichirō (1975), 'Shamanism in Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 2:4, pp. 231–87.
- Isomae, Jun'ichi and Thal, Sarah E. (2000), 'Reappropriating the Japanese myths: Motoori Norinaga and the creation myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27:1&2, pp. 15–39.
- Martínez, Dolores P. (ed.) (1998), *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (ed.) (2014), *Gender and Japanese Society*, Abingdon: Routledge.

- Matsumae, Takeshi (1978), 'Origin and growth of the worship of Amaterasu', *Asian Folklore Studies*, 37:1, pp. 1–11.
- Nakamura, Kyoko Motomochi (ed.) (2002), 'The significance of Amaterasu in Japanese religious history', in C. Olson (ed.), *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*, New York, NY: Crossroad, pp. 196–89.
- Shimazono, Susumu (1979), 'The living Kami idea in the new religions of Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6:3, pp. 389–412.
- Stickland, Leonie R. (2007), *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*, Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- Sunim, Hae-ju (Ho-Ryeon Jeon) (1999), 'Can women achieve enlightenment? A critique of sexual transformation for enlightenment', in K. L. Tsomo (ed.), *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 123–40.
- Teeuwen, Mark (2003), 'The creation of a *honji suijaku* deity: Amaterasu as the judge of the dead', in F. Rambelli and M. Teeuwen (eds), *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm*, London: Routledge, pp. 115–44.
- Willis, David Blake and Murphy-Shigematsu, Stephen (2008), *Transcultural Japan: At the Borderlands of Race, Gender and Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Marcos Centeno, Ph.D., is lecturer and the Japanese programme director at Birkbeck, University of London. Before that, he worked for the Department of Japan and Korea at SOAS, where he taught several courses on Japanese cinema and Asian cinemas and convened the MA 'Global Cinemas and the Transcultural'. Centeno was also research associate at Waseda University (Japan), research fellow at the University of Valencia (Spain) and visiting researcher at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 and Goethe Universität Frankfurt. His research interests are in Japanese documentary film, archaeology of images, post-war avant-garde, transculturality and representation of minorities in Japanese cinema.

Contact: Department of Cultures and Languages, School of Arts, Birkbeck, University of London, 43 Gordon Square, London, WC1H 0PD, UK.
E-mail: m.centeno@bbk.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1062-0206>