THE CONFUSION ERA

ART AND CULTURE OF JAPAN DURING THE ALLIED OCCUPATION, 1945–1952
Erasing and Refocusing: Two Films of the Occupation

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he big screen grants the filmmaker surprising power to create history — as anyone who has seen the works of Oliver Stone can attest: historians may waver, but millions of moviegoers have been convinced beyond doubt that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by a conspiracy and that Richard M. Nixon was an alcoholic. A sketchy theory, when fleshed out with all the visual and aural effects at the filmmaker’s disposal, can take on the certainty of fact, and the project of presenting history through film can be a dubious one.

Yet these same means can also deepen viewers’ understanding. Films by two of Japan’s greatest living directors, Shinoda Masahiro’s 1984 MacArthur’s Children (Setouchi shonen yakyudan) and Imamura Shohei’s 1961 Pigs and Battleships (Buta to gunkan), express distinctively Japanese views of the Allied Occupation. They are among the few Japanese films on this era that are accessible outside Japan, and both offer alternative interpretations of a period that has often been presented, too simplistically, as a tribute to “democratization” and “progress.”

Shinoda’s MacArthur’s Children is a lyrical, almost nostalgic presentation of the Occupation as a period of hardship yet opportunity; Imamura’s Pigs and Battleships, based on a novel by Otsuka Kazu, offers a rawer look at a time of opportunity and exploitation. Despite their differences, the two films grapple seriously with historical realities, and each offers a Japanese view of Japanese behavior during the Occupation in which the Americans involved are seen mainly as a backdrop.

DIRECTORIAL VISION

Early in their careers, both Imamura (born 1926) and Shinoda (born 1931) worked as assistants to a giant of the classical Japanese film, Ozu Yasujirō, but each diverged from Ozu’s vision. Although both could be classified as New Wave directors, their paths have not been parallel. Like the other directors of Japan’s New Wave in the 1960s, who originally rebelled against the older studio system, they identified themselves with Japan’s youth culture and against political developments like the renewal of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and

Kinta, the gangster wannabe, and his girlfriend Haruko, in Hogs and Warships (also known as Pigs and Battleships). She is an early example in a series of resilient women seen in Imamura’s films.
Security in 1960. But while Shinoda has moved back and forth between an explicitly theatrical style and a softer historicism, Imamura tends to depict lower levels of society — prostitutes, pimps, B-grade actors, local mafia. Frequently relying on metaphors from nature, including bestial ones, Imamura’s films, including *The Insect Woman* (Nippon konchuki, 1963) and *The Pornographers* (Jinruigaku nyumon, 1966), are often bluntly realistic, almost documentary. He provides us with a view of what one French critic has aptly described as “the vital, primitive, illogical and contradictory energy of the authentic Japan.” More recently, however, Imamura returned, in part, to an Ozu-like style in *Black Rain* (Kuroi arne, 1989), with its restrained treatment of the effects of radiation stemming from the Hiroshima bombing.

The typical quickness of Imamura’s editing, resembling that of his compatriot Kurosawa Akira, contrasts with Shinoda’s style, which often follows a more elegant rhythm. In films like *Demon Pond* (Yashagaike, 1980) and *Gonza the Spearman* (Yarino Gonza, 1987), Shinoda presents a kind of detached beauty in the face of harsh realities, drawing on traditional stylistics from the Kabuki and Bunraku (puppet) theater. His *gendaigeki* (contemporary drama) films and his documentaries share this heightened aestheticism and depict the ephemerality of life while also pointing to the underlying darker, often erotic forces in Japanese society.

*MacArthur’s Children* lacks the daring mix of historical narrative and avant-garde set and music found in earlier Shinoda films, such as *Double Suicide* (Shinju ten no Amijima, 1969). It opens with the emperor’s radio announcement on August 15 that Japan had lost the war. Documentary footage of General Douglas MacArthur’s entry into Japan is mixed with shots of the Genbaku Domu (Atomic Bomb Dome) in Hiroshima; schoolchildren grind ink to obliterate any reference in their textbooks to the glories of Japan’s wartime prowess.

Covering such serious themes with a disarmingly light tone, Shinoda presents an Occupation period in which war crimes trials and executions are mixed with baseball tournaments and the semicomical loss of precious black-market rice. Underneath this deceptively smooth surface, however, *MacArthur’s Children* stresses the essential role of the inner strength of the Japanese people in making the Occupation a success — a strength that triumphs over material concerns. Shinoda’s characters overcome obstacles with resilience and resourcefulness. And, through the role of the war criminal (played with appropriate restraint by actor-turned-director Itami Juzo), Shinoda vividly depicts the grief that the war crimes trials caused to the Japanese.

In *Pigs and Battleships*, by contrast, Imamura criticizes not only the U.S. military bases still in Japan, which he considers a necessary evil, but also those Japanese who become so obsessed after the war by material gain and by an attachment to old ideologies that they lose the ability to think clearly and to lead independent lives. *Pigs and Battleships* shows how quickly the dreams of youth can be tarnished in a rapidly changing society. In both films, the overstated performances by some of the more comic characters add a destabilizing sense of celebrating among the ashes.
OPENINGS

Both films begin with a mixture of festive notes and darker undertones. The opening of Pigs and Battleships features "Stars and Stripes Forever" on the soundtrack. Yet the accompanying visual scene immediately establishes the film's sardonic mood: drunken American servicemen solicit and/or are accosted by Japanese prostitutes in a bawdy red-light district near the Yokosuka Naval Base. Imamura fills this sequence with high-angle shots that reduce the people to the size of insects, thus providing a clue that their grandiose plans are doomed to failure.

Shinoda begins MacArthur's Children with the upbeat "In the Mood" melody over red, white, and blue titles — but also over scenes of Hiroshima, homelessness, and war wounded. This sequence gives way to a mixture of staged and documentary footage of the dignified, sometimes tearful reaction of the Japanese to the emperor's radio announcement. Together, the sound and visuals set the tone of that film: a bittersweet recollection of a time just beyond the horrors of war that seemed to offer the promise of better things to come.

BASEBALL

Although baseball would seem to represent a quintessentially Western import imposed on post-World War II Japan, in MacArthur's Children it serves as an apt metaphor for the interconnected destinies of Japan and the United States (fig. 1). Shinoda emphasizes that it was a solidly Japanese sport by making one of the film's
Japanese protagonists, Masao (played by the popular singer and actor Go Hiromi), a former baseball player — a star in the 1930s — who lost a leg as a soldier in the war. The film's title translates literally as "Setouchi Boys' Baseball Team," and indeed baseball becomes the leitmotif of the film, linking past, present, and future among the Japanese. It exemplifies the merging of Western technology and Japanese spirit that Japanese authorities had been espousing since the mid-1800s.

The past is invoked when the Japanese spectators at the concluding baseball game beat on traditional drums, as if participating in an annual harvest dance, to inspire their team. Baseball's role in the present figures in the desire of the elementary school teacher Komako (Natsume Masako) to motivate her motley class of students, disoriented by the changes brought on by military defeat (fig. 2). And as the team progresses from the ridiculous to the exemplary, Masao, the deeply depressed veteran of a lost battle, regains his confidence on the sidelines as a coach. It is only through baseball that the defeated Masao can find a path for himself away from injury, toward the possibility of a new career in the future. Shinoda has described his own view of the Japan-American All-Star Game that concludes his film:

The children playing baseball with the American soldiers in the film has nothing to do with revenge. It was not the Americans who killed the father [the war criminal], but rather it was we who were responsible for his execution. Back then, we thought that we were to be blamed and not our enemy, and I still think so now.⁴
Despite Shinoda's assertion that there is no revenge motivating the ball game between the Japanese schoolchildren and the American servicemen, the game includes a reference to the soul of the war criminal "returning" in the form of a dog that unexpectedly appears and grabs the ball in its mouth, thus allowing the Japanese children to emerge triumphant. It would be hard to imagine the generally celebratory finale of the film had the Americans won. What the baseball game represents is a progression of three generations of Japanese (grandparents, teachers, and children) through bitter memory on to a spiritual, if not military, victory.

In contrast to the upbeat baseball theme in Shinoda's film, Imamura prefers to concentrate on more adult games. While the poverty endured by the Japanese after the war is presented only obliquely by Shinoda, Imamura reminds his viewers over and over that, in a country defeated militarily and economically, money and merchandising are everything. Only in rare moments does Imamura evoke a past glory, as when the gaze of a drunken, dispirited man pans up to a photograph of a young and eager Japanese soldier displayed on his wall. As for baseball, Imamura's only shot of the game shows postwar Japanese children playing it in the rubble of a housing project.

**GANGSTERS**

Although the gangster theme seems to be a connecting thread between both films, Shinoda offers a lighter satirical view than does Imamura, in keeping with the general approach in MacArthur's Children of accepting difference and moving on. One of the schoolboys in MacArthur's Children, Saburo (Oinori Yoshiyuki), longs to become a baraketsu (a slang word for "gangster"), and he eventually quits school to join two older characters, whom he calls his "brother and sister," in black market activities. These two, with their flashy dressing and uncouth manners, are drawn directly from American gangster films. As in Shinoda's Pale Flower (Kawaita hana, 1963), the ceremonial behavior found among gangsters is portrayed with a note of irony.

The stakes seem higher for the gangster-wannabe Kinta (Nagato Hiroyuki) in Pigs and Battleships (fig. 3). A Japanese James Dean type, he tries to fit into a group of older yakuza (gangsters) whose activities are more sinister than the cartoonlike gangster and moll in Shinoda's film. Imamura's gangsters rough people up for money and dump dead bodies into the ocean. Kinta trails after them slavishly — like an older variant of the gullible schoolboy Saburo in MacArthur's Children. In Pigs and Battleships, the gangsters represent the tough new breed of Japanese who manipulate the general societal instability of the time to their own advantage.

These two characters' disappointment with the gang "family" offers a telling contrast between the two films: the moment of disillusionment proves a bittersweet turning point for Saburo, but a fatal mistake for Kinta. The codes of loyalty to the group associated even with an illegal entity like the yakuza are shown in Pigs and Battleships to be merely a thin veneer covering up laziness and the desire for quick financial gain. The metaphorical use of pigs is apt. By the end of the film, in which porcine behavior abounds, those animals, subverting the usual Japanese reverence for cleanliness, can no longer be contained.
DEMOCRACY AND AMERICANIZATION

Two weeks after the emperor's speech admitting defeat, armadas of American forces began to arrive in Japan. What followed was a time when General MacArthur, the "shadow shogun," attempted to destroy the Japanese war machine, dismantle the zaibatsu (the domination of Japanese finance, commerce, and industry by a few families), and carry out land reform. Meanwhile the Japanese also moved forward on their own agenda, aimed at such goals as the formation of a government-guided economy. The meeting of cultures went far beyond chewing gum, nylons, "kissing scenes" in movies, and songs like "You Are My Sunshine," whistled by GI's.

This was a time when enthusiasm for democracy was everywhere, but no one — including the Americans — was sure what it would mean for the Japanese. Shinoda cleverly points up this uncertainty in a scene in which the schoolboy Ryuta (Yamauchi Kaya) anxiously responds to the new injunction for coed classrooms with the question: "Is that democracy?" Later, the self-reliant war widow Tome (played by Shinoda's wife, Iwashita Shima) angrily asserts that "women are equal now" but finds her barbershop-turned-bar closed down as business moves away to larger cities like Osaka and Tokyo.

In Pigs and Battleships, one gang member rationalizes that because democracy means a move away from feudal-period hierarchies, stealing pigs from their leader is a way of "democratizing" the gang. These gangsters (who beneath their tough exteriors are actually cowards and hypochondriacs) espouse loyalty to the group but are in fact ruthless individualists who view American culture and "democ-
racy” as a source of easy money and few restrictions (fig. 4). For them, democratization equals personal gain, at anyone else's expense. In both films, democracy is shown to be more than it first appears to average Japanese citizens, but also less than the answer to their dreams.

In a 1986 interview, Shinoda asserted that the children in his film are not necessarily unhappy about being made to erase passages in their textbooks; on the contrary, they are pleased at having less to study.5 If that is so, then what does he mean by the scene in which the young boy Ryuta is told by his grandfather to burn the drawings of Japanese battleships he made during the war, lest they displease the American Occupation forces who will soon arrive? In this episode, the morose faces of the Japanese adults and children reveal a deep anxiety and regret about the new turn in Japan's fate. These two scenes — erasing and remembering — present different aspects of the complex Japanese response to defeat.

In actuality, there were also many paradoxes in the American stance toward “democratization” during the Occupation period.6 For example, MacArthur advocated both a free press and labor unions, but would not tolerate either criticism of the Occupation or crippling strikes (such as the strikes at Toho film studio). Directors who belonged to leftist groups confronted unusual obstacles in filming and distributing their work. The American film censors offered a mixed view of democratization —
working to erase “feudal tendencies” in films (swords, displays of loyalty to a master) in favor of “democratic” norms like kissing, gunfights, and respect for women. (In MacArthur’s Children, Shinoda presents one charming scene of a confused Japanese audience observing one of the “kissing movies” endorsed by the American censors.) And yet American movies that depicted internal problems in the United States, such as The Grapes of Wrath and All the King’s Men, were not allowed in Japan during the Occupation period. Scripts for Japanese films were tampered with until they became innocuous enough. The only presentations of the atomic bomb that the censors permitted were sentimentalized ones.

Both MacArthur’s Children and Pigs and Battleships are replete with Americanisms: chewing gum, comments on the supposed sexual prowess of American servicemen, jazz and swing music, displays of impressive U.S. tanks and planes, and Japanese bidding each other farewell with “bye-bye” (fig. 5). The focus is definitely more “American” than broadly “modern.” While “modernization” might be seen as potentially efficacious, especially in a country sorely in need of rebuilding following the devastation of war, “Americanization” carries with it the strong suggestion of one culture being imposed on another. Both Shinoda and Imamura regard that process with some dismay.

The mixture of fear and admiration toward the foreigner that Japanese anthropologist Yoshida Teigo has found throughout Japanese history is nowhere clearer than in the subtexts of these two films recalling the Occupation. Even the sardonic, swag-
growing tone adopted by Kinta and his gangster cohorts in *Pigs and Battleships* reveals that ultimate power is not in their hands. The battleships in the title belong to the Americans; the Japanese gangsters own the pigs that stampede through the streets. Imamura favors neither the encroaching American powers nor the often infantile gangsters. His faith resides elsewhere, in the resilient female archetype he creates.

**FEMALE ARCHETYPES**

At the end of *Pigs and Battleships*, a disgusted Haruko (Yoshimura Jitsuko) leaves the dead body of her former boyfriend Kinta and exits for the growing industrial area of Kawasaki to work in a factory there. As she departs, Haruko passes through a throng of giggling women waving to the next boatload of American soldiers arriving on shore. Film scholar David Desser points out that Haruko in *Pigs and Battleships* is one of the early representatives of what turns out to be a series of case studies in Imamura's work of resilient Japanese women, in touch with a deeper level of Japanese nature underneath the surface veneer of modernization. This deeper level sought by Imamura often includes raw, earthy images of incest, brutal sexuality, and displays of sudden, violent emotions — a far cry from the more common image of the Japanese as reserved and as interested only in the subtle and understated.

Nine years after *Pigs and Battleships*, Imamura directed another film offering a view of the interaction between American servicemen and Japanese women during the Occupation period. *History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (Nippon sengo shi: Madamu Omboro no seikatsu, 1970) is an on-screen interview of a Madame Omboro. Interspersed with the interview are newsreel clippings of events that took place during Japan’s (and her) recent history. Madame Omboro talks about her experiences during the Occupation as a member of the pariah class (*burakumin*) who became involved with American soldiers in her small bar in Yokosuka, near Tokyo. Eventually she had a child by one American sailor and later married another sailor thirteen years her junior. At the close of the film, she moves to San Diego with him, but it is implied that the resilient and intrepid Madame Omboro will strike out on her own again.

Although less polemical than *Pigs and Battleships*, *MacArthur's Children* also presents female characters as particularly strong and inventive. This is certainly the case with the schoolteacher Komako, who remains the moral core of the film. In addition, in the character of Hatano Mume (Sakura Shiuri), the daughter of a Japanese war criminal (fig. 6), Shinoda offers a somewhat pessimistic view of the future generation:

**In *MacArthur's Children*, I feel the greatest violence in the character of the young girl. She doesn't foresee a normal life in normal society as part of her future. She's full of many kinds of hatred for the history of the whole era, particularly, I think, for the emperor, to whom her father was so faithful.**

Shinoda’s use of the word “violence” in reference to Mume gives a clue to the subtlety of his depiction of the Japanese response to the Occupation. As portrayed on
Figure 6. The end of one way of life, the beginning of another: Mume, daughter of a convicted war criminal, and the schoolboy Ryuta look to the future in *MacArthur’s Children*.

Despite the news of her father's death, Mume joins the baseball game as a means of exorcising memories and rejoining life. Here as in *Pigs and Battleships*, it is a female character who inspires faith in a true redefinition of postwar Japanese society.

**STICK FIGURES**

Just as Hollywood has often romanticized the "East," so do films like *MacArthur's Children* and *Pigs and Battleships* offer a rather one-dimensional view of Americans. Neither Shinoda nor Imamura dwells on the kind of fear the Americans might have felt in approaching their former enemy on Japanese territory. Rather, the Americans are presented as they might have appeared to the Japanese at that time — broad-brushed figures projecting an air of self-assurance and invulnerability.

In *MacArthur’s Children*, there is one comic sequence in which anxious Japanese villagers peer from behind tall grasses at empty streets as the Americans roll into town. Thoughtless American soldiers, walking on tatami mats in their army boots or playing with the severed head of a Bunraku puppet, are reprimanded by more sensitive members of their staff, but they all still march noisily through the streets singing "Army Boogie" in unison. The Americans take their jeep for a joyride up the steps of a Shinto temple, with Japanese children racing close behind.

In scenes like these, Shinoda seems content to point out cultural differences between the exuberant Americans and the outwardly more constrained Japanese. One senses that the director's loyalties might be more complex, however, when the apparently well-meaning American soldiers are seen spraying Japanese children with large quantities of DDT: the film was made in 1984, long after DDT's dangers had become known.

In *Pigs and Battleships*, the presence of Americans in Japan is equated with corruption, greed, and a kind of moral cancer, like the cancer that one of the key gangsters believes has invaded his body. The Japanese, like the pigs — which are fed on the garbage from U.S. naval ships and then sold on the black market — are shown as ultimately dependent on the Americans and lacking in basic common sense. Even the relatively clear-headed Haruko reports having attended a party and danced the samba, and later is raped by a group of drunken American soldiers. At their worst, the Americans in these films share in the general chaos; at their best, they can construct only fragile bridges between two different ways of life.
PERSONAL MEMORIES

The actual problems many Japanese city-dwellers faced were far more acute than either film implies. With transportation systems near collapse and serious food shortages, the early Occupation period was far less picturesque or exhilarating than the two films suggest. Then again, the situation was somewhat less grave in the countryside and in the smaller cities on the periphery of the island chain, where the films are set.

Shinoda has elaborated on his own feelings about defeat:

To be defeated in war is a very sweet experience. Winning is only transitory, while being defeated involves this problem inside ourselves for a long time. However, whether Japan became greater through this is questionable.¹⁰

As film scholar Leger Grindon has pointed out, movies set in historical times are a means of “grappling with the present by writing about the past.” The historical-fiction film, as distinct from the documentary, can be, at its worst, an artificial creation, shut off from reality. Yet it can also represent a serious engagement with historical issues and an attempt, through its characters and story line, “to synthesize the individual and collective causes operating in history.”¹¹

One has to ask what films like MacArthur’s Children and Pigs and Battleships have to say not just about the Occupation era but also about the times in which they were made. While Imamura’s film is filled with the forward-looking, raw energy still apparent as Japan rebuilt itself during the 1960s, Shinoda’s film from the 1980s
reflects a time when the Japanese could pause in their frantic race toward modernization and reflect on the rapidly receding memories of the past thirty years.

Shinoda is aware that his film is both a depiction of a past event and (to use Grindon's term) an "address to the present":

Now the Japanese have plenty to eat and live a full life, so maybe at last they can have the leeway to look at the images of their own defeat. I may be a member of the last generation that remembers MacArthur calling us cultural twelve-year-olds. . . . Since I was already fifteen, it pained me greatly that he put me at the twelve-year-old level. That statement may have been the first inspiration for this movie. The boys in this movie are twelve years old.12

MacArthur's Children and Pigs and Battleships — acts of remembrance — record what was essentially a period of erasing and rewriting. Just as the grandfather in MacArthur's Children tells his grandson to burn his pictures of Japanese battleships, so do the Japanese as a whole turn away from earlier expressions of nationhood. It is easier, however, to burn a child's pictures than a memory. As the elementary-school teacher Komako passionately instructs her young students: "Our souls are not under occupation."

If films cannot always promise historical truth, they can at least offer an encounter with the power of memory. In characters like Komako, Haruko, Kinta, and Masao, Shinoda and Imamura have sketched out Japanese perspectives on the Occupation, and so have endowed a historic era with human proportions. ●
NOTES

I would like to thank Milestone Film and Video, East-West Film Classics, the Japan Film Library Council, and Ace Pictures for their assistance in procuring materials for this essay.

1. Other Japanese films that refer to the Occupation period include Mr. Shosuke Ohara (Ohara Shosuke-san, 1949) by Shimizu Hiroshi, in which a powerful landowner is forced to turn over a large part of his land to his tenant farmers, and Kumai Kei’s Japanese Archipelago (Nihon retto, 1965), an expose of several Occupation-era murder cases with possible connections to U.S. Army Intelligence. Neither film is available in the United States.


3. Shinoda displays his concern with wartime Japan in his film Takeshi: Childhood Days (Shonen jidai, 1990), set in a mountain village in the final year of World War II. Like MacArthur’s Children, it focuses on a group of children whose power struggles mirror the political struggles in the larger society. The conflict between the village bully Takeshi and the weaker (but more intelligent) city boy Shinji who is evacuated to the country during the Tokyo bombings parallels the kind of changes that will occur in postwar Japan as knowledge replaces physical strength in the rush toward modernization.


5. Ibid.


12. Quoted in “Dialogue on Film,” American Film, p. 11.