

## INTRODUCTION

### “Detour to the East”: Noel Burch and the Task of Japanese Film

Harry Harootunian

#### History, Signs, and Difference

In Ettore Scola's now classic reminiscence of Italy's postwar years, *We All Loved Each Other So Much* (*C'eravamo tanto amati*, 1974), we have both a history that seeks to recall the duration of time from the end of fascism and the Resistance to the new prosperity of the 1970s in the lives of three friends and a historicization of film making, especially that of the great neo-realist directors like De Sica, to whom the film is dedicated, Rossellini and Fellini. Scola's tribute demonstrates, above all else, how cinema itself constituted the privileged mode of cultural expressibility in this postwar historical moment and was, in fact, indistinguishable from the history of those years it had made its task to represent. By the same measure, it is possible to see a replication in different cultural registers of comparable instances in Germany, France, Great Britain, and Japan to identify the actual making of film as the cultural form best suited for narrativizing the postwar world. With Scola and indeed others, I believe this elevation of film was reinforced by the recognition that the new temporality of postwar signaled the maturity of a generation which had grown up with the film as a common and familiar experience in their everyday lives, an everydayness in which the image itself had become as routinized as common sense. In this regard, Scola's film is simultaneously autobiographical as well as historical, fusing personal memory with the regimes of history, place with temporality.

In postwar societies, the film reigned supreme over other forms of representation, since its own regime predated television, and its proven capacity to portray the image far exceeded the powers of writing to capture the texture of the present people were living in those years. In fact, it was film's special talent to transform experience and memory into image. Despite a few important novels and plays here and there, Amis and Osborne in Great Britain, Grass in Western Germany, Pavese and Moravia in Italy, Oe and Dazai in Japan, it was film that would lay claim to authoritatively speaking for an everyday life already saturated by the image. Even before the war, Walter Benjamin had already spotlighted the importance of the image and its indelible relationship to the everyday. "Every day," he proclaimed in the essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Reproducibility," "the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image (*bild*), or better in a facsimile (*Abbild*), a reproduction." Benjamin was already sensitive to the desire of the "present day masses 'to get closer' to things spatially and humanly," as well their "concern for overcoming each things uniqueness." Film was empowered to furthering the grasp of the everyday necessities governing every life by its reliance on "close-ups, by its immense capacity to probe hidden details in familiar objects," and by "its

exploration of common place mileaux through the ingenious guidance of the camera.” With the close-up, space accordingly expands, opens up on a vast, hitherto unimaginable scale, revealing the everydayness in a wholly unfamiliar and strange aspect. It was precisely the practice of this conception of (bourgeois) realism that attracted Western viewers to the late films of Ozu Yasujiro at the moment his critics and audiences in Japan had rejected them as too statically sterile and close to nature. The desire to get closer to the immediate and secure a purchase on presence (a yearning for the auratic) suggests an identity between the everyday and history itself—to make the two coincide. Under this circumstance, everyday life would constitute the fundamental regime of history in modern life (for Tosaka Jun it was history’s mystery), a closing of distance (which actually creates more distance) that makes the camera and film the designated means to capture the image as history. Where Ozu’s explorations of the everyday failed, in the eyes of his critics, was in their fatal propensity to imitate nature, both separating it from the social, at the expense of repressing its “kernel of history,” and banalizing the world of things.

The re-issuing of Noel Burch’s pioneering account of Japanese film, *To The Distant Observer*, first published in 1979, restores to us the best book written on Japanese cinema, despite its author’s modest claims that he didn’t know much Japanese, and brings us back to the scene of the postwar history and the film’s historical duty to recall and narrate its world for us. But Burch’s book is also an often forgotten reminder that at the heart of capitalist modernity pulsates the ceaseless process of interaction between past and present where the latter is constantly called upon to conjure the former. Among other things, Burch’s book was written during the most intense moment of the Cold War and the heyday of modernization theory and the countless studies it spawned to tell us how societies like Japan, especially, were able to negotiate the challenge of change by relying on the mediation of received practices and values that had miraculously managed to survive the tumultuous transformations of history. Where Burch departed from this Cold War paradigm, which held area studies in the United States in its thrall, lay in his recognition that the interaction between past and present was far more complex than a simple game of seesaw rocking the binary of tradition/modernity back and forth against a background noise of world-competing ideologies. What his book showed was how older cultural practices and artistic forms had to be radicalized to make Japan’s modernity something more than simple imitation, even though this message was often drowned out by the din of eagerness to present Japan as a modular exemplification of peaceable and smooth evolutionary modernization.

We must, in any case, grasp Burch’s immense achievement, as the example of Scola suggests, as a conjunctural response to the postwar and the role played by the film to historicize its moment each society shared, despite their local differences. At the time he wrote his book, Burch was committed to the program of contributing further to a Marxian aesthetics inaugurated by Brecht and Eisenstein, by taking what has proved to be a momentous “detour to the East.” Yet the detour, dedicated to comparing the modes of Japanese and Western cinema, was a necessary condition for constructing an agenda that might disclose the “ideologically and culturally determined system of representation from which the film industries of Hollywood and elsewhere derived their power and profit” (p. 11). An integral part of this program was to provide a history of Japanese cinema that was capable of illustrating how native theory was inscribed in actual artistic and cultural practices and how the postwar drew upon the fund of a prewar experience of film making that already utilized this tradition by radicalizing it in order to distance itself from the domination of Western exemplars. But Burch also proposed to demonstrate how the production of postwar film was implicated in the period’s history and politics, whether it was Ozu’s lifeless and static renditions of everyday life (confirming the status quo) or Oshima Nagisa’s exuberant avant-gardism calling for a new subjective will demanding a break with the past at the same time he was measuring his relationship to his great predecessors.

While Burch was properly concerned with the task of teasing out of the form and content of film both ideology and intimations of a specific historical conjuncture accompanying the formation of Japanese cinema, the marks of his own temporality were manifest in his decision to employ the interpretative promise of French structuralism, founded on the Saussurian linguistic model re-articulated into a science of signs, current in France at the time of writing *To The Distant Observer*. His book may very well

have been the first serious employment of semiology in area studies and the study of Japan, and this reason alone explains why it was so swiftly overlooked. Burch had made France his home and even acknowledged that the book on Japanese film was his first in his native language. In this environment he seized upon the powerful meditations of Roland Barthes, who had already outlined semiology as a hermeneutic in *Mythologies* (1957) and subsequently put it to practice in a book on “Japan,” called *L’Empire des signes* (1970). The latter book, once it found its way into an English translation, brought groans from Japan specialists who worried about Barthes’s acknowledged lack of language mastery. It was especially “The Empire Signs,” rather than the earlier *Mythologies*, which Burch recruited to enhance his account of the cultural semiotics informing Japanese film but at the expense of hobbling his desire to historicize. We must understand that Barthes had undertaken the assignment to construct a fictive “Japan” in order to display how a move to the outside immediately discloses the spurious claims of Western subject-centered universalism, once other non-centered or non-centering positions occupying space are considered. Barthes’s little book provided both a practical illustration of the semiological method of reading Japan as a text, much to the unknowing outrage and howling of professional scholars of Japan, and a set of themes enabled by his interpretative strategy. For Burch, both the practice of semiology and its production of a thematic were crucially important in envisaging his own program, which, he announced, would be concerned with modes of representation common to Japanese films (14). While his bold commitment to a theoretical practice should have had a leavening, if not salutary, effect on a moribund area studies mired in the stale mission of supplying useful information to the security state, its principal consequence was, I suspect, to supply the fledgling field of Japan film studies with a foundational text that inaugurally mandated the link between theory and practice. But his reliance on Barthesian semiology and its thematic inventory turned his admirable detour to the East into a journey away from history and the Marxian approach to art he hoped his study would enrich.

One of the lasting contributions of the Barthesian semiological reading of the Japanese text was its recommendation to “irrevocably” discount content and the entailing hierarchy authorized by the form/content relationship and to concentrate on the surface play of differences. It is interesting to speculate, in this regard, what would have happened had Burch chosen a Lukacsian formalism over a structuralist one, despite his avowal that a content-oriented approach has usually been associated with the acquisition of the Japanese language. Regardless of the truth of this perception, my reason for raising a question over the choice of formalist strategies is to suggest that Lukacs, along with others like Bloch, Benjamin, and even Brecht, not to forget Pierre Macherey who was closer to home, had already shown how an interrogation of artistic form (or what Fredric Jameson later called “inner content”) was capable of yielding a text’s ideological not-said and the trace of its historical condition of production. But with Barthes, Burch’s program was diverted from actually accounting for the regimes of historicity that mediated both the production of films at a certain moment and its accompanying historiographic representations, to concern itself only with “reading the body of Japanese film in the light of Japanese history.” The effect of changing gears resulted in dispatching the role of history to a distant background or simply to occupying the status of an accessory to what is immediate and static. What the Barthesian program left out was not merely history but rather what motored it—capitalism itself—even as a modest, vanishing mediator. At the very least, the approach managed to take on board the risk of inducing or, at least, sanctioning, a relentless linearity, obeying simply chronological succession and progressive achievement. In other words, homogenous time and blank seriality ready to contain the story-line of successive development or, rather, the inevitable unfolding of narrative form. In fact, Burch’s historical trajectory often appears far more conventional than those isolated hints offered by Barthes in a number of texts where the historical referent is unmasked as a projection of the signified. Some writers on Japanese film, like David Desser (*Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*, 1988) have sought to revise this penchant for linearity found in Burch by installing a new form of periodization based on the coextension of distinct paradigms (undoubtedly a stand-in for discourses) which are supposed to avoid the entrapment of successive and uninterrupted development of forms and practices from earliest times to the present. But while the tactic permits the coexistence of apparently different paradigms, it has not resolved the question of time and the identity of co-eval but different

temporalities they must necessarily represent. What these various efforts fail to elucidate is how and why coexisting regimes of historicity actually perform the labor of structuring and mediating to produce their effects, a defect partially resolved in Eric Cazdyn's recent book, *The Flash of Capital: Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (2002). In Burch's "history," there is instead a long, useful meditation on the various traditional art forms and practices that had been pressed into the service of the film's early formation in Japan, a process he calls "radicalization," especially during the years of the crucial interwar conjuncture. Once he has laid the groundwork for this "historical" obligatory scene, he moves to the site of the postwar and the production of films by Kurosawa Akira and Oshima Nagisa. The implications of this chronology are consequential since the first half of the book, taken up by a long indeterminate history that nourished art and culture, aspires to provide evidence of how filmic forms naturally derived from earlier, and essentialistic, traditional practices, conforming to simply an evolutionary trajectory as if they came down to us as historically unmarked emanations. Inevitably, the strategy comes uncomfortably close to recuperating the modernization paradigm. But the latter section of the book encounters history in the figure of a specific conjunctural configuration consisting of war, defeat, the capitalist reconstruction of Japan, and "democratization" of the country under military occupation. We must also be aware of Burch's own historical moment bounded by the Cold War and the American desire to exemplify Japan as a model of peaceful, evolutionary capitalist development.

Burch's initial decision to rely on Barthes as a guide for mapping the textual terrain required a scuttling of the older form/content dyad for simply form alone and its pliability, its apparently infinite elasticity to withstand historical transformations. Announcing early in the book his intention to write not simply a history of Japanese film, the determination to privilege form directed him to construct a kind of genealogy or history of forms that seeks to record the way theory developed in the actual practices of art and culture and its inseparability from them. Burch was convinced that theory, as such, was a Western invention, a conceit that had no real presence in Japan until the modern era, apart from a few dramaturgical and poetic texts (like Ki no Tsurayuki and Zeami), even though the nation's history was littered with powerful reminders of theoretical texts produced by Motoori Norinaga, Dogen, Ogyu Sorai, and others. If native theory was thus distilled from its embedding in actual practices and forms to reveal its difference from Western theoretical traditions, there still remains the problem of the role played by history in their appearance and their transformations. Burch's forms, as I've suggested, are not generated by historically mediated forces but rather arrive as simply irreducible essences that are always, already there, to make his tableau ultimately more culturalistic than historical.

Yet we know it was important for Burch's agenda to account for the text of the Japanese film in such a way as to satisfy the Barthesian model to de-center prevailing certainties founded on the presumption of the sovereign, centered subject of Western philosophy. The artistic practices and forms transmitted from the past are now resituated in the inaugural present of Japanese cinema; their incorporation into the body of a new filmic mode of representation will act singularly to de-center the hegemony of Hollywood aesthetics and systems of codes. Hence, Japanese film was, from its beginnings, not only free from slavish imitation, but its radical difference materialized as a "thorough-going critique of the dominant modes of Western cinema" (17). Although this argument has now passed into the domain of common sense, the desire to demonstrate difference as the basis of a critical perspective thrown-up by the complex play of past in present still discloses a remarkably prescient perception of modernity and its moment, regardless of its specific geopolitical location.

### **Rumors of the Cold War**

Behind Burch's effort to portray how the text of Japanese film, from its inception, represented a system of differences stands the conviction that artistic originality never amounted to a dominant value in Japan, especially when contrasted with the Euro-American bourgeois preoccupation with creative genius and proprietary ownership of the work. On the contrary, Burch has insisted on making explicit this dissimilarity in order to highlight the Japanese capacity to "perturb." What he apparently was responding to was the Cold

War fever among “champions of Japanese culture,” those vaunted area specialists who had already decreed Japan as a bourgeois bulwark against communism in East Asia, owing to its modernizing achievement and avoidance of revolutionary rupture. According to the logic of the Cold War struggle, it should be remembered that there could be only two polar positions, each trying to command or monopolize singular adherence; any sign of “difference” risked breaking ranks with the American crusade to identify the “free world” with democracy and capitalism for the blandishments of communism and revolution. For the United States, this clearly meant remaking societies in its own, idealized image, as was the intent and purpose of modernization theory and developmentalism in those years. Client states like Japan were obliged to satisfy the requirements of this exported Americanized replica by declaring their faithfulness and showing they were not examples of systematic difference capable of challenging and subverting what was being promoted as a “normative” model of society. In this scenario, originality, usually signifying genuine difference, was replaced by “adaptation” and “achievement.” The argument circulating in those days proposed that while the Japanese were not always original their skill in adapting borrowings from others represented remarkable achievement. In other words, the Japanese were merely imitative. In Burch’s reckoning it was vital for American Cold War ideological interests to mask this talent for imitation and borrowing by appealing to “adaptation” and “achievement,” and dramatizing, along the way, the Japanese willingness to adjust to “normative” and “rational” values. By the same measure the self-same modernizing ideology projected a social Darwinian schema that upheld practices and “tradition” that had managed to survive the long haul of evolution to persist into the present. The strength of these vestiges lay in their survival value and hence in their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances as naturally evolved emanations that had avoided revolutionary violence and conflict. Burch must be admired for having seen the ill effects of this vulgar Cold War ideology and the complacent confidence of its proponents in its “normative” claims. But he treads a perilously thin high wire between the modernizing ideology of traditionalism and its valorization of an adaptive aptitude receptive to change and the persistence of older artistic and cultural practices that mediated, through a process of radicalization, the formation of Japanese cinema as a system of difference from the beginning. The flashpoint of this collision between the modern West and Japan ignited over the concept of originality, which the former had institutionalized as natural while the latter had disavowed as a value, sponsoring, in its place, a “deliberate” emphasis on the “material reality of the circulation of signs” (32). This persistence of traditional culture is simply attributed to either the historical absence of “revolutionary disruption” in Japan’s history, feudal enclosure and isolation, or the permanence of forms that remain as they are once they have reached stability. (Here, Burch echoes the cultural discourse of Kuki Shuzo, whose writings in the 1930s he could not have known when he wrote his book.) In this respect, Burch has traded a Cold War ideology for a culturally essentialist conceit which, as his quote from Kato Shuichi amply illustrates, recalls for us Watsuji Tetsuro’s prewar conceptualization of cultural “stadialization” or layering (*jujosei*). “Practically no style has ever died,” Kato wrote, “in other words, the history of Japanese art is not one of succession but superposition” (33). What Burch fails to take into account is how this principle of “superposition” worked simply to displace the vast unevenness introduced by capitalism. Japanese were obliged to live in the everyday of their modernizing experience, rather than manifesting, as he supposes, timeless traces conserved from an uninterrupted past. (Cosmopolitanism so fashionable among the Japanese bourgeoisie in the 1920s was another displacement for this lived unevenness.) Here appears, in any case, the faint figuration of a historical watermark imprinted on the inaugural moment of Japanese film in the 1920s and 1930s, a barely visible sign of the history attesting to an everyday Japanese were living throughout these years buffeted by accelerated capitalist modernization and mass consumption.

Instead, Burch wants to suggest how the “cinematograph struck a number of fundamental chords in what is termed the Japanese sensibility” (57). It should be appreciated, in this connection, that Burch’s emphasis upon the ability of traditional artistic and cultural practices to link up with more modern modes of expressibility like the cinema recalls for us Masao Miyoshi’s prior attempt to rescue the *shishosetsu* from its forced identification with European bourgeois novelistic forms that translators were shaping largely for an unsuspecting American readership. The *shishosetsu* combined received literary forms and newly imported

elements of the novel to represent the Japanese experience of modernity and to fix its system of difference from Euro-American models. As a form it was neither a copy nor imitation of the novel, as foreign translators too often believed, nor even its “adapted” Japanese equivalent. Miyoshi early, and often, pointed out that the *shishosetsu* constituted a new combinatory embracing older elements and newer literary devices and codes that spoke directly to and of the Japanese experience of modernity. But once in the hands of translators who novelized it to meet foreign (American) market expectations, it was invariably written off as either inferior or degraded imitation demonstrating that Japanese did not know how to write novels. The same could be said of philosophic speculation in interwar Japan, which also suffered mightily from a plethora of bad translations, and was too often dismissed as simply paler imitations of European originals.

Despite these synchronisms and cultural meshing, Burch acknowledges that in the “history of modes of representation” in the West, the appearance of new classes like the industrial proletariat invariably shows how an ascendant social constituency will demand more “directly ‘realistic’ representations” than the ruling group. This propensity for greater realism meant less abstraction among the lower orders. In Japan during the 1930s this conflict over realism and abstraction was played out in philosophic speculation and literary criticism over the meaning of terms like “*genjitsu*”—reality—and actuality and what constituted the concrete. At the same time, older theatrical forms like *kabuki* and puppet theater (*bunraku*) adapted to new circumstances by shifting from purely presentational performance once associated with *noh* to greater emphasis on representation, according to Burch, even though it is hard to square this observation with a tradition of grand spectacle identified with both. But what seems important for Burch is *kabuki*’s ability to strike a resonance with its audience and its willingness to incorporate the act of reading in artistic and social practices. In the manifest behavior of theater audiences, especially the shouting that accompanied a performance, he was convinced he had detected the operation of a maneuver that elicited their actual involvement in what was taking place on the stage, illustrating a kind of Brechtian move before the letter, since such vocalized participation remains distinctive yet “closely related to that of the performers themselves” (71). Even more to the point, the puppet theater, caught within the Barthesian gaze searching for systems of difference, demonstrated the separation of the “act from the emotive gesture,” and “reserves a mode of writing to each.” “All of this,” Burch quoting Barthes, “is linked to the distance effect recommended by Brecht” (73). In Burch’s thinking, these observations disclose the inscription of a theory in theatrical practice that underscores the principal themes informing his own approach to cinema: “the relationship of [the] Japanese system of representation to logocentrism, the irrelevance of the concept of originality in this culture, the division of the representational process into distinctly separate texts, relatable only through an act of reading, and the relevance of the whole to Western revolutionary thought” (74).

### Film’s Golden Age

For Burch, the culmination of this difference was condensed in the practice of the *benshi*, those earlier reciters and narrators of the film who invariably ended up interpreting it. Burch was undoubtedly one of the first outside of Japan to concentrate on the central role played by the *benshi* in the formative stage of Japanese film. This discussion still remains rich, detailed, and intellectually provocative, and unveils the extent of the mastery he was able to command over some of the more arcane and idiomatic aspects of Japanese cinema history. But for our purposes (and I am not a specialist in Japanese film) the discussion dramatizes two important points: (1) The early appearance of live commentators dedicated to supplying a narrative accompanying the film reflected neither a desire to make sure audiences were provided with understanding nor represented some attenuated distortion of received conventions and practice. The *benshi* represented an instance of what Burch has described as a transformational module or “radicalization” of trait characteristics, which refer to the different ways cinema codes developed earlier and elsewhere were “transformed,” “displaced,” “truncated” in Japan during the interwar decade. In this sense, the development of the *benshi*, who became public performers in their own right, signaled a historical and cultural blending of older Japanese street theater and story telling and the demands of the silent film. Moreover, Burch insists, there

was “nothing ‘low’” about medieval horse operas—*chanbara*—derived from earlier *kabuki* that had had already developed this theme for the stage and which dominated the film of the 1920s and 1930s. “This ideological repression of *intertextual ramifications* of two traditional arts and popular forms,” he continues, proved to be particularly important because the early film was founded on them. In one sense this repression was previously reflected in the “plebian” origins of Western film and the “onus” of shame associated with the vulgar arts. We can also note here the beginnings of that fateful division between high and low art and culture and the attempt to distance the former from the latter, which increasingly had become the reservoir of mass commodified taste and consumption. Hence, the “so-called theatricality of the early cinema in both the West and Japan” was systematically effaced of this stain of origin (Burch calls it Original Sin) once narrative editing, with its reliance on “close-ups,” “matching devices,” etc. had developed to make good the cinema’s claims to aesthetic status rather than mere popular entertainment. By the same token, the repression excluded all claimants but one which now represents Hollywood as being with cinema itself (76). This equation thus opened the way to elevating the individual artist to the heights of creative genius as the single standard of filmic art. Burch perceived in the early Japanese film’s “wayward” course not an example of late development, as such, or even immaturity, but rather an active “refusal to grow up.” Delayed adolescence meant that Japanese film in the 1920s offered the conditions for the presentation of those received forms of practice which the Hollywood system of narrative would have seen as “primitive” and worthy only of exclusion and elimination. For Burch, then, conservation of a cultural residuum made possible the “remarkable” development in the 1930s and, more importantly, assigned to the *benshi* the historically active role of “tacit resistance” to the hegemony of Hollywood codes. While the *benshi* owed its origins to Edo theater, its actual formation in modern cinema was driven by a desire to recruit “politically ambitious men” bent on raising themselves in life. In time, I should add, the *benshi* began to play a greater role in politically vocalizing the films they were supposed to speak for. As a “traditional device,” these commentators operated to empty the image of speech, separating its vocalization from the screen, and assumed its narrative burden (78). “In a sense,” Burch reminds the reader, “Japanese film was not silent at all...” (ibid.).

(2) If Japanese cinema constituted a “storehouse” of earlier cultural and artistic practices ready at hand to be “radicalized,” its experience with receiving foreign cultures and radicalizing trait elements provides a perspective for a “Marxian critique of modern Western history...” (89). Obviously, the Barthesian model of a fictive Japan constructed to call into question Western claims of subjective fullness shadowed this critical vocation. A long and durable tradition, according to Burch, promoting “acceptance,” “rejection,” “adaptation,” was accessible to Japan in the 1920s and 1930s in cinema, the arts, and literature. But, it should be added, these offerings existed elsewhere, as well. What particularly interested Burch were the efforts to standardize Hollywood codes in Japan and to Americanize Japanese films. During the 1920s and 1930s “Americanization” was paired with the explosion of mass consumption, dramatized most by the popularity of imported Hollywood films, especially the material world they portrayed, and, in the opinion of critics like Oya Soichi and Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke, was already announcing a relentless process of cultural dilution and failure. The filmic struggle against the Hollywood system simply inflected the larger resistance being waged against Americanization. Efforts were made to eliminate the *benshi*, and not just because of the gradual introduction of sound, and *oyama* (males who played woman roles). But it is the failure to remove traditional elements that attracts Burch’s attention, their rootedness, and what impressed him as a “materialistic approach to film art” (95). Moreover, this episode reflected a contradiction produced by a perceivable non-correspondence between historical development and art. This apparent non-concordance between history and art and its consequences for the failure of reflection theory was actually a commonplace everywhere but was particularly sharp in Japan, where it sent theorists and critics scurrying to reevaluate the conduct of ideology. Burch accredits the surfacing of this “inconsistency” to simple class conflict, but, as I suggested earlier, the “contradiction” must be situated within a framework marked by unevenness, which Japanese during the interwar period were living and experiencing intensely at the most fundamental levels of an everyday life constantly crisscrossed by different temporalities and political, economic, social, and cultural

intensities. This immense sense of unevenness was mapped onto the great divide between the Hollywood linear narrative code (the Griffith system) and a linearization of the image Burch sees as antithetical to the tradition of Japanese art, literature, and theater, not to forget language itself, whereby narrative is separated, set apart, envisaged in performance “as one function among others” (98). It is instructive, if not paradoxical, that Burch’s hero is the director Kinugusa Teinosuke, especially for films like *Page of Madness* (*Kurutta ippeiji*, 1926) and *Crossroads* (*Jujiro*, 1928), the one film maker who successfully managed to both assimilate the Western filmic codes yet work beyond them (123), prefiguring and enabling what Burch calls film’s “Golden Age” and its incredible surplus of cinematic talent, Ozu Yasujiro, Mizoguchi Kenji, Naruse Mikio, Ishida Tamizo, Shimizu Hiroshi, and Yamanaka Sadao.

### The Postwar Japan Scene and the Specter of Historical Uncertainty

We must consider the meaning and import of Burch’s categorization of prewar film as the “Golden Age.” The classification, like the book itself, is situated in the postwar, even though it is a retroactive judgment of the prewar, a present different from the past he wished to describe, implying, moreover, an evaluation from this later temporal perspective (here Burch occupies the place of the “distant observer”). More to the point, the category of Golden Age speaks to the question of history itself or, better yet, its absence. Burch acknowledged that postwar Japan, harnessed by military occupation, sought to reshape Japanese society from the ground up, so to speak, at the same time it left the emperor at the top, despite the aspiration to democratize it completely. Far exceeding the rather modest charge to protect Japan from itself that the United States accepted at Potsdam, signaling the end of the war and Japan’s capitulation, this undertaking ended up imposing by fiat a second round of Americanization (the first was in the 1920s and was initiated voluntarily by the Japanese, as it was elsewhere in the post World War I era). In a certain sense, postwar Japan thus opened the doors to what might be described as the rush of history (not necessarily fresh air). Burch’s decision to seize upon the periodization of “Golden Age” to describe prewar film stems from a certainty that Japanese had been able to retain and readapt received cultural and artistic practices in the formative stage of cinema at the same time they were capable of accommodating and even assimilating codes from abroad without fear of succumbing to complete American hegemony. This notable achievement, attesting to the agency of a nationally endowed talent, resulted in a strategy of resistance—the decision of Japanese cinema to “not grow up,” as he put it, both supplying a perspective from which Marxism was strategically poised to criticize Hollywood codes and culminating in an epitomization in the figure and work of Kinugusa Teinosuke. Hence, the category of “Golden Age” invariably risked engendering dangerous associations of the prelapsarian, prehistorical, the archetypal, and always the unhistorical. A non-place that must exceed history it seeks to valorize, the idea of a Golden Age returns us to its origins in the scene of the postwar where its ghostly presence hung heavily over the present to remind it of a standard of film excellence now passed, which, according to Burch, only Kurosawa Akira has been able to fulfill because he alone, like Kinugusa, had mastered imported codes but succeeded in going beyond them. What all this suggests is a kind of repetition of scenes between the late 1920s and the early 1950s, where the force of tradition—native codes—heroically holds out again against the press of history itself, an argument that speaks less of Marxism than of nativism or the veracity of structural survivals. With defeat and war’s end, democratization and involuntary Americanization, Japan entered the precincts of somebody else’s history, by which the difference it had once managed to achieve was now surpassed. The way had already been prepared by the war and the complicity of film makers like Ozu to extol “those traditional values which constituted the ideological base for the new authoritarianism,” prefiguring, perhaps, Kazuo Ishiguro’s later portrayal of the “artist of the floating world” (262). The occupation reforms aimed at implanting a petit bourgeois social order, but the determining factor in cinema after 1945, according to Burch, came with the apparent intensification of class struggle leavened by a “system of representation” largely serving the requirements of “liberal monopoly capitalism” both Japan and the United States were pledged to realize as the goal for the new, postwar global order. Burch condemns as the “fossilization” of technique those filmic procedures that once signaled the



successful fusion of received cultural and artistic practices with newer codes (277). In Ozu we follow a progressive playing out of the productivity of older, once distinctive signs of the dialect enabling Japanese film to refuse to grow up, now morphed into a frozen mannerism. Ozu's postwar films, so favored by Western audiences, simply satisfy an expectant ideology of realism, centered on portraying the banalities of everyday life as a facsimile of life itself and an indication of mimetic representation and cinematic transparency on a scale rarely reached (278). But Ozu had been once noted for his powers of perturbation in films where the "images of the real" call attention to their artifice to confound the possibility of any realist reading. In this regard, Ozu's films in the 1930s undoubtedly inflected the discursive struggle raging over defining the real and actual—*genjitsu*—whose relevance the postwar had all but forgotten. Yet the very banalization of everyday life that permeated the postwar films of Ozu inadvertently still summoned all those prewar discussions concerning the importance of everyday life and the historicity it was believed capable of yielding—what the philosopher Tosaka, evoking Marx on the commodity form, identified as the "kernel of history." Significantly, Ozu's propensity to reduce the everyday to the proportions of a frozen and static countenance only confirmed the extent to which the category itself had changed and its promise dissipated since the 1930s, when it had been invested with the authority of the concrete and vast transformative powers. Burch recognizes this descent to mere documentary presentation (but not the real descent of everyday life as it once had been envisioned and the reasons for this momentous change) rising from an "elimination of a Brechtian acknowledgement of artifice" that once inspired film making in the "Golden Age." Here, the agency of history he so plainly wished to demonstrate as the principal of his Marxian critique was easily eclipsed by the primacy lavished on aesthetic devices of theatrical representation.

Yet, it was precisely this Western conception of realism dogging film makers that prompted progressive critics, usually Marxists, to discount Ozu and others in the postwar period as part of a sweeping recommendation to dismiss traditional national cinema. Burch manages to rescue the powerful critique of Imamura Taihei, who had written one of the most incisive books on the documentary before the war and whose writings still await to be situated in both the historical conjuncture of the 1930s, when he tried to wrest the documentary from the clasp of propaganda, and the immediate postwar era when he trained his sights on the task of cinema. Imamura had already unleashed a brilliant attack on traditional cinema as early as 1950 that took aim at film directors like Ozu for having trivialized everyday life. Like other traditionalists, Ozu was found guilty for failing to express anything more than passivity toward the real. But we must also recognize in Imamura's criticism of Ozu's reduction of the everyday to stilled lifelessness the barely audible echoes of discussions from the 1930s that had envisioned everydayness as the vital center of a possible transformation of Japanese society. By the 1950s the initial promise of everydayness had all but faded, as its center of activities passed from the streets to suburban housing outside major cities like Tokyo. In this regard, Imamura uncovered in Ozu's postwar films the persistence of the "Japanese spirit," an attenuated "Japanism" that too easily served the interests of fascist ideology, which thinkers like Tosaka Jun had warned against in the 1930s. Imamura complained that directors like Ozu were content "to make everyday life simply into an extension of nature itself," enabling an escape from society into nature, and shifting the focus "from character description of events and peoples into descriptions of natural scenes" (279). Despite Burch's approval of this critique, he took back what he had given in order to rebuke writers like Imamura for having relied too excessively on the representational tools of the bourgeoisie to satisfy the demands of the class struggle determined by the historical stage Japan had entered. But Ozu's description of the environment worked to tenaciously evade the pulsations of history altogether for the comforting optic provided by nature, and its sure promise to refract the view of society into a mass of trivial details that are made to stand in as a natural landscape with "people" acting as accessories. Even though the articulation of this critique was situated in the evolving class struggle in the postwar period and won Burch's approval, he suddenly backed off to convict it as "vulgar Marxism." It is possible to ascribe this ambivalence to the observation that even though it reflected an instance of social protest so necessary for the class struggle, "it failed as a notable contribution to cinema as an art form..." (281). Far from being a vulgar Marxian judgment, Imamura was expressing precisely the kind of critique of ideology Barthes called "mythology" (even though there is no

evidence he had read him) and which he described as the naturalization of history that he had worked out in *Mythologies*. Which brings us back to Burch's conceptualization of a "Golden Age" read through the bourgeois lens of Barthesian semiology, with an incipient class struggle playing only a bit part, and his own growing suspicion that history in the postwar period means bad art and film. It is not at all surprising that Burch discovers in Kurosawa Akira "the sole master of this period," precisely because he was able to take the assimilation of Western modes of representation to new levels, like Kinugasa before him, and build upon them with compatible aestheticizations of traditional material (291, 282).

Toward the end of his itinerary, Burch singles out Oshima Nagisa for having perceived the bankruptcy of left strategies that were still depending on the spectacle of "victimization." At the same time, he was also acknowledging a growing necessity to do something else in the face of a history of bad faith (so brilliantly dissected in his *Night and Fog in Japan* (*Nihon no yoru to kiri*, 1960). Oshima looked for concretized expressions of "the subjective will of the people," a realization of real subjectivity whose concept was already being worked out by intellectuals of differing stripes in endless discussions immediately after the war that ultimately produced the lifeless abstractions advocated by people like Maruyama Masao and the so-called "party of the enlightenment." It was vitally important to give such a conception of subjectivity substance at this historical moment as a condition for the task of moving on and developing an "independent art form" unburdened by the past. Despite the romantic individualism masquerading as avant-garde iconoclasm, Burch correctly identified in Oshima a dialectic furiously oscillating between the desire to employ theatrical device and artifice and to constantly refer (if not defer) to the history of Japanese film in order to define his project and his relationship to it, a wildly swinging movement from traditional Japan which he both loves and hates to his embracing of Western bourgeois cosmopolitanism, mediated by a libertarian selfhood. Burch also throws Marxism into this stew and then pulls back to confess that managing such a combustible mix of mutually canceling positions was too complicated a task for a single person. But he could just as well have been describing his own journey to the East, marked by a complex ambition to read the text of Japanese film according to the protocols of structural linguistics and semiology yet driven by the forces of history—the agency of an active class struggle. At every turn, Burch wanted to demonstrate how art and history have not always, if ever, coincided, but this preoccupation committed him to forfeiting the mediating promise offered by regimes of historicity at the excessive expense of upholding art's sovereignty.

We are, nevertheless, fortunate to have this amazing book in a new edition after twenty-five years of dormancy, and especially grateful for the second chance it offers to make Noël Burch's detour to the East into a lasting journey to history.