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Industrial Genres, National Times, and Media
Ecologies By Alexander Zahltten

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BOOK REVIEW

*The End of Japanese Cinema:
Industrial Genres, National Times,
and Media Ecologies*

By Alexander Zahlten

Duke University Press, 2017
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Reviewed by Lauri KITSNIK



This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of the book that still has to be considered the most, if not the only comprehensive history of Japanese cinema in the English language. While *Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (1959, co-authored by Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie, and slightly updated in its 1982 edition) was criticized for its auteurist and Cold War-era attitudes, its immense achievement and authoritative status is impossible to ignore. Its very existence seems to have effectively prevented any study of comparable scope from emerging, while the field of Japanese film studies itself has expanded considerably during the last few decades. This lasting anxiety of influence is visibly imprinted on Alexander Zahlten's first monograph, *The End of Japanese Cinema*, both in its provocative title and in its book design that borrows from Anderson and Richie the intricate charts that delineate apprenticeship lineages and studio affiliations and blurs out all names, as if to suggest the need to eschew these industrial relations that have been hitherto considered an inextricable part of structuring Japanese film history.

It is not surprising then that Zahlten picks up from where Anderson and Richie left off, and seeks to present a more balanced and, as a result, more complicated picture of Japanese cinema since the beginning of the decline of the studio system in the early 1960s. From the first pages on, his lucid prose captures the reader's full attention, and the careful unfolding of the three case studies of under-researched genres (Pink Film, Kadokawa Film, and V-Cinema) lets Zahlten emerge as an authority on his chosen subject. It is an easy feat simply to claim that certain phenomena have been neglected in scholarship, but what provides an impetus here is the sheer volume of screen works belonging to the respective genres, often making up half of Japan's entire film production in a given year, while being unanimously ignored even by Japanese film scholars. In fact, it emerges quite clearly from Zahlten's analysis that this deliberate overlooking has long been a mechanism to delimit the boundaries of what is commonly considered Japanese cinema.

It seems appropriate, then, that *The End of Japanese Cinema* is not a study of art works devised by great filmmakers but rather a story about cinema's crucial, albeit gradually diminishing, role—if not quite its demise—within the larger media environment during the second half of the twentieth century. In contrast to various recent studies on Japanese cinema that could be characterized as microhistories of particular filmmakers, genres, or

periods, Zahlten's is an ambitious project that seeks to reconsider the way we think about Japanese cinema and popular media in general. While its theoretical underpinnings can be criticized, the book largely succeeds in this task by providing three instructive case studies from different decades with insights and implications that extend well beyond their own time and respective creative and industrial agendas.

The first two chapters relate to the "industrial genre" of Pink Film, low-budget features known for displaying semi-explicit sexual situations as well as politically subversive material. It is true that certain trends of that period of Japanese cinema have been thoroughly researched in studies such as David Desser's seminal *Eros Plus Massacre* (1988). However, while Desser discussed the work of the Pink director Wakamatsu Kōji within the context of Japanese independent cinema, Zahlten delineates the genre's genealogy within its production and exhibition contexts. The fact that many of the films discussed are lost makes the task truly admirable. Uncovering early Pink Films is not unlike studying prewar Japanese cinema, but while the latter can often rely on various readily available (para-)textual sources, Zahlten has had to employ marginal, difficult-to-obtain publications and oral histories. What I found particularly enlightening about Zahlten's analysis of Pink Film is the way he manages to relate the genre to shifting audiences and gendered spaces amid the suburbanization of Japan during the 1960s.

When discussing Kadokawa Film, the genre that occupies the next two chapters, Zahlten meticulously delineates the shrewd media-mix business strategy initiated by the publishing tycoon Kadokawa Haruki. What makes this genre different from both Pink Film and V-Cinema is that it very much represented what mainstream Japanese cinema looked like around the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, all genres bear a close affinity in their capacity to inspire major studios in adapting new strategies. Ironically, initial intentions often get lost in the process of becoming common mainstream practice, an important part of which is taking a strong stand against the established film industry. In this underground-becomes-mainstream template of film history, the solidifying of any genre leads to its inevitable demise, while big business is ready to subsume everything.

The final case study is that of V-Cinema, straight-to-video films that proliferated in the 1990s, a genre perhaps better known to general audiences through the early work of Miike Takashi. Even more than with Pink Film, quantity is clearly important here with output of the genre (and its numerous subgenres such as mahjong and pachinko films) reaching mind-boggling figures. At the same time, while the particular films discussed in detail are interesting enough, there is still a feeling that the excruciating majority of them are mostly only good for their curiosity value. At the same time, it could be argued that V-Cinema represents an early example of binge-watching, particularly in the way it relates to how the film-watching experience is shifting to domestic spaces. Indeed, the three case studies together make a strong argument about the arc of different spaces for cinema, beginning with small theaters for Pink, the biggest possible ones for Kadokawa, and private screens for V-Cinema. As the focus of Zahlten's study is removed from individual filmmakers, audiences and exhibition spaces necessarily take central stage.

Perhaps the biggest question that remains after reading *The End of Cinema* is whether the term "industrial genre" is really applicable to these three very different cases. We are left to wonder what it means exactly in each context. Zahlten somewhat succumbs to the temptation to tie everything too neatly together, while at the same time repeatedly

confessing how confusing and inconsistent the agendas of the phenomena that he observes really are. Importantly, each of the three genres is compelling enough in its own right and does not require a too narrow terminological umbrella. What these three clearly have in common, however, is the way they went against the common sense of the established film industry and by so doing managed to revitalize it. If anything, they should be called “anti-industrial” for their capacity to subvert what was considered standard practice at the time and to reconfigure the field, especially when it comes to finding and catering for specific new audiences.

The book ends with Zahlten shifting his attention to more recent developments, discussing platforms, fan labor and Japan’s soft power. One of the paradoxes of this study is that while it attempts to break away from a template that isolates cinema as an object of scholarship from a wider media environment, it still cannot shrug off the notion that cinema is something that can be discreetly observed, confirming the usefulness of studying Japanese films, or, as Zahlten would put it, films from Japan. The timeline of Zahlten’s study comes to an end with Abe Shinzō’s resignation as prime minister in 2007. One suspects that his subsequent comeback with a vengeance would certainly add yet another layer to the never-ending story of endings and beginnings.

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