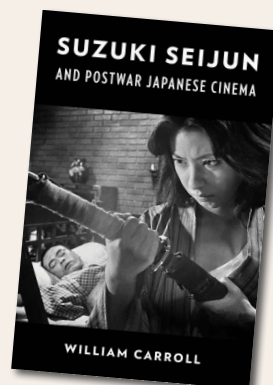


BOOK REVIEW

Suzuki Seijun and Postwar Japanese Cinema

By William Carroll

Columbia University Press, 2022
304 pages.



Reviewed by Jennifer COATES*

William Carroll's study of director Suzuki Seijun (1923–2017) makes a series of interesting and timely interventions into scholarly understanding of a filmmaker whose work has received renewed interest from audiences outside Japan as a broader range of his films have become available. Extant scholarship has tended to address Suzuki's work through close analysis of one or two particular films or a focus on perceived career highlights or transition points.¹ Full volumes devoted to Suzuki in English have tended until now to be published in the form of catalogues, often linked to a specific retrospective or screening programme.² Carroll's focus is somewhat more discursive, in that his study begins from a description of the competing narratives around Suzuki's career and high-profile departure from Nikkatsu studios in 1968.

Carroll identifies two key objectives which distinguish this volume from previous publications. First, through interrogating the origins of commonly cited descriptions of Suzuki's work, from Nikkatsu boss Hori Kyūsaku's complaint that Suzuki's films were "incomprehensible" (p. 4) to the director's own description of "movies that make no sense and make no money" (p. 5), Carroll perceptively notes that Suzuki's contemporary reputation rests on "a partial translation taken out of context" (p. 5). To remedy this, he proposes a return to the close reading of the films themselves, while attending to the industry practices and viewership of their era, to reveal a more accurate picture of Suzuki's standing in his field and impact on Japanese filmmaking more broadly. Second, Carroll locates this project within recent developments in the field of Japanese studies by connecting discourse around Suzuki's films and practice to recent interest in Japanese-language film theory, much of which is still unavailable in translation. Locating Suzuki as "the object of focus for multiple strands of Japanese film theory" (p. 7), Carroll refuses to categorize the filmmaker as an illustrative example of either New Left social issues or cinephile theorists'

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1 See DiNitto 2004 and Kitamura 2013 for examples of the former, and Domenig 2013 for the latter.

2 Field and Rayns 1994; Vick 2015.

concerns. Instead, he offers a more nuanced picture of the big issues of art and life under discussion at the end of the 1960s in Japan.

A major contribution of the book is therefore the access it provides to as yet untranslated Japanese film theory and criticism. Another is the painstaking appendices, including unfiled projects, collaborative works with the Guryū Hachirō group, and commercials and books authored by Suzuki, as well as a list of his works as assistant director. The framing of Suzuki's persona itself is also nicely nuanced, in contrast to more classical auteurist approaches which can take the construction of the director's public face a little for granted. Carroll insists on a clear distinction between "the figure Suzuki Seijun" and "the true historical figure Suzuki Seitarō" (p. 154) which underscores his point about the use of Suzuki and his public struggles by politically-motivated factions.

This admirable focus on Japanese-language sources has perhaps created one of the few weaknesses of the study—an overreliance on PhD dissertations and other unpublished or non-peer-reviewed works in English. I also felt the absence of certain publications in English, which do not take Suzuki as their central focus but do offer potentially useful readings of his work and broader public significance in Japan in the late 1960s.³ In some places there are minor editing issues that can impede comprehension, most often where a plot point or character name is mentioned in passing without a full explanation, which follows a few paragraphs later (for example, the discussion of the importance of the "warehouse painting" in *Young Breasts* on p. 126). Lastly, and this is perhaps asking too much of a single study, statements about audience interpretation and understanding could perhaps have been better supported given that many in Suzuki's original audience are still alive today. Claims such as "the films' original audiences would be able to fill in the elided material with comparable scenes" (p. 72) would be more convincing if the voices of some of those audiences could have been heard.

Overall, however, this is a very valuable contribution, not only to the study of Suzuki's work and legacy, or to the study of Japanese cinema of the 1960s, but to the broader project of undoing the domination of English and European film theory within global film studies. Carroll breaks new ground not only in the use of Japanese-language materials but also in his development of an understanding of "the Seijunesque" that refuses to define the director's style according to motifs, traits, and tendencies, but rather insists on "push-and-pull, direct juxtaposition, or synthesis between multiple tendencies that would seem to be irreconcilable" (p. 124) as markers of a cohesive body of work that nonetheless changes over time.

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