

Comedies!



The Center for East Asian Studies is pleased to present eight Japanese comedies. Although each film is made in various periods and with different contexts, they are all guaranteed to make you laugh! At the same time, you might also find yourself positioned in the midst of an unstabilized situation with an open passage to the relationships, situations, powers and histories in which these films were made. When watching these films, ask yourself the following questions: What is the structure producing the effect of comedy? How is the structure of comedy different from that of other genres, such as melodrama and violence? What is the social context in which these films were made and what is the attitude of these films (as well as filmmakers) towards these situations? What is the effect of laughter in relation to contemporary situations? Rather than just being consumed by laughter, did (and do) these comedies offer a point of resistance against State power, dominant ideologies, capitalism, etc? In the end, it is, of course, laughter that is most important to fully appreciate these comedies.

Organized by Yuki Takinami, *graduate student in the Committee on Cinema and Media Studies*

**ALL SCREENINGS ARE FREE AND TAKE PLACE AT JUDD 302, BEGINNING AT 12:40 PM.
THE FILMS ARE IN JAPANESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES.**

Jan 18. HANA-BI

a.k.a. *Fireworks*, *Hana-bi*, Kitano Takeshi, 1997

When the celebrated TV comedian, Kitano Takeshi, made this film, it turned out to be a bleak one. A violent policeman named Nishi, who is played by Kitano himself, retires from the police force and is now looking after his dying wife, Miyuki, who has leukemia. Nishi borrowed money from the yakuza to care for his wife, but he struggles to pay it back. So, he plots a daring bank robbery to get enough money to pay off his debt and to take his wife on a final vacation. *Hana-bi* is an extremely quiet film with a lot of restrained violence. Kitano Blue, the color Kitano prefers to use to depict the sky and the ocean, governs the washed-out world of the film. *Hana-bi* is the seventh film made by Kitano Takeshi and won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

Jan 25. Kikujiro

Kikujiro no natsu, Kitano Takeshi, 1999

After making one of his darkest films, *HANA-BI*, Kitano writes, directs, and stars in this amusing comedy about a boy named Masao who lives with his grandmother in Tokyo and sets out on a journey to find his mother, a woman he has never met. His neighbor, a middle-age man named Kikujiro (played by Kitano), accompanies Masao's travels. Their journey is delayed over and over due to Kikujiro's obsession with track cycling races as well as the breakdown of their car. In between their many mishaps, Masao and Kikujiro encounter various funny people who provide the viewer with many laughs. Finally, Masao and Kikujiro arrive at their destination, the place where Masao's mother lives, but... *Kikujiro* reminds us that Kitano's funniest film is not so far from his darkest film.

Feb 1. I Was Born, But...

Otona no miru ehon-Umarete wa mita keredo, Ozu Yasujiro, 1932

This film takes the viewer back to the days of silent films. It is set in a period in which the global system of capitalism began to determine the everyday life of ordinary Japanese. The young master, Ozu Yasujiro, succeeded in depicting the life of a salaryman, a newly emerging white-collar class during this period, in a satirical tone. Two brothers, Ryoichi and Kenji, move to the suburbs of Tokyo with their parents. In this neighborhood, the boss of their father lives with his son, Taro. After some skirmishes with a gang of local kids, Ryoichi soon becomes the top dog. One day, Ryoichi and Kenji are invited to Taro's house with other local kids and get to know the social order of the adult world. With this film, Ozu won the first of his six "Kinema Jumbo Best Film of the Year" awards.

Feb 8. Good Morning

Ohayo, Ozu Yasujiro, 1959

Twenty five years later, Ozu made a loose remake of *I Was Born, But...* Two brothers, Minoru and Isamu, live in the suburbs

of Tokyo. Minoru is the top dog within the community of local gang of kids. Just as in *I Was Born, But...*, the gag of farting is featured (remember that *I Was Born, But...* is silent). The surface frivolity is underlaid by medium consciousness which is revealed in the climactic scene where Minoru and Isamu demand that their parents buy them a television by boycotting speaking. Remember that *Good Morning* is a remake of a silent film. It is also interesting to note that 1959 is the year when TV was rapidly gaining popularity in Japan and began to threaten the film industry.

Feb 15. Tampopo

Tampopo, Itami Juzo, 1985

1980s Japan was at the height of postmodern late-capitalism. Saying this, Itami is known for mocking postmodern culture! This film's story is centered around food culture. A young female owner of a ramen-noodle restaurant, whose business is not good, makes every effort to perfect the "art of noodle soup making." In addition to the absurd story and comical touch, the structure is quite postmodern: plural narrative lines accompany, not necessarily converging into the denouement. Beyond the logic of narration, the method of bricolage extends to the film's referentiality: *Tampopo* gives homage to numerous films made in the past, including Marx Brother's *Duck Soup* and Godard's *Breathless* to Ozu's *I Was Born, But...* Surely, it is quite enjoyable to point out these references. In doing so, are we entrapped within the logic of late capitalism?

Feb 22. Irresponsible Era of Japan

Nippon musekinin jidai, Furusawa Kengo, 1962

It can be said that Itami Juzo takes a critical distance to capitalism, however precarious this position might be. The problem is more complicated when it comes to *Irresponsible Era of Japan*. Similar to *Tampopo*, *Irresponsible Era of Japan* does not take any responsibility for creating a coherent narrative. In this film, an irresponsible salaryman, Taira Hitoshi (this name literally means "average"), gets ahead in business without really trying. Two key contexts should be pointed out: a high economic growth during the 1960s in Japan (cf. the Tokyo Olympics in 1964) and the logic of the program picture (this film belongs to the "irresponsible" series).

Feb 29. Giants and Toys

Kyojin to gangu, Masumura Yasuzo, 1958

If the previous two films are connected with capitalism either consciously or unconsciously, *Giants and Toys* is an affirmative attempt to intervene in capitalism. As a leader of a new generation of filmmakers during the late 1950s, Masumura Yasuzo asserted the importance of comedy while maintaining a strong subjectivity that young Japanese should not succumb to the State power. While he developed his theory of comedy primarily against melodramatic modes which consumed Japanese cinema with tears at that time, Masumura redirected it, using it to critique capitalism in *Giants and Toys*. Yet, the story goes quite dimly. With all efforts to act on his own subjectivity, the protagonist loses a war in the candy market and is swallowed by absurd commercialism.

March 7. Humanity and Paper Balloons

Ninjo kamifusen, Yamanaka Sadao, 1936

The series will conclude with this quiet *jidai-geki* (period drama) comedy made during the dark period of the late 1930s. Set in the 18th century, the film depicts ordinary people who live toughly (with a certain easygoing nature) under the domination of the local elite. By the mid-1930s, any direct critique of the increasing militarist direction was met with censorship. So, many Japanese filmmakers turned to the period film genre to make a critique of the present situation. After finishing this film, the director, Yamanaka, was sent to war and died. His friend and fellow director, Ozu Yasujiro, regretted the loss of a talent like Yamanaka and said "it is such a pity that *Humanity and Paper Balloons* was his last film."

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Japan Foundation Midwest Film Festival

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Friday, February 8

6:30pm All Under the Moon (Sai Yoichi, 1993)
9:00pm Pacchigi (Izutsu Kazuyuki, 2004)

Saturday, February 9

6:30pm Hanging Garden (Toyoda Toshiaki, 2005)
9:00pm Linda Linda Linda (Yamashita Nobuhiro, 2005)

Sunday, February 10

3:00pm Water Boys (Yaguchi Shinobu, 2001)

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