Shinoda's Pale Flower as a Japanese film noir

Peter A. Yacavone


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jjkc.3.1.13_1

Published online: 03 Jan 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 45

View related articles
Shinoda’s *Pale Flower* as a Japanese film noir

**ABSTRACT**

Shinoda Masahiro’s *Kawaita hana/Pale Flower*, a key film of the Japanese ‘New Wave’ of the 1960s, is poised between the conventional ‘genre’ cinema of the Japanese studios and two prominent strains of international narrative cinema: the European art film and the American film noir. Released in 1964, Shinoda’s film is at once a contribution to, and a unique hybridization of, these several distinct, and culturally specific, traditions. This article addresses the multivalent influences of European art cinema and film noir on *Pale Flower*, addressing, in particular, on what grounds we might convincingly speak of this film as a Japanese ‘film noir’. Through formal analysis, and discussion of the film’s representation of character and subjectivity, *Pale Flower* is shown to be a recognizable and self-conscious exercise in noir stylization on the American model, while also incorporating formal innovations of the European art cinema.

One should be sceptical as to how many Japanese films can usefully be labelled films noirs, a rubric originally invented by French critics to describe, post facto, a group of American crime films of the 1940s. The post-war Japanese film will often contain occasional flourishes of highly stylized, often low-key lighting, without otherwise resembling an American film noir in plot, tone or intent. But a few Japanese crime films engage in a more expansive dialogue with film noir, especially Kurosawa’s *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), Shinoda Masahiro’s *Kawaita hana/Pale Flower* (1964) and Suzuki Seijun’s *Koroshi no...*
Rakuin/Branded to Kill (1967). These films were released within four years of one another and during the emergence of the so-called ‘Japanese New Wave’. In this article I will concentrate on how in form and theme Shinoda’s Pale Flower does and does not merit a noir classification, which will also entail consideration of the film in the context of the Japanese New Wave, and in relation to both the European art film and the standard Japanese studio-made yakuza film.

Kurosawa’s crime films of the late 1940s, Yoidore tenshi/Drunken Angel (1948) and Nora inu/Stray Dog (1949), were formative influences on subsequent Japanese crime dramas. Both earlier films have sequences of criminal activity or detection filmed in a distinctly noir manner. But they are also social message pictures and are concerned with the moral development of their protagonists. They contain major sequences that are decidedly alien to the noir mood. For instance, at the climax of Stray Dog, as the young cop and young crook pummel each other in the mud until exhausted, a choir of schoolchildren passes by on the road above. The juxtaposition of these two situations is redemptive, rather than merely bitter: both men are profoundly affected by the children’s singing, for it pulls them out of the closed circle of despair and violence that the film has so carefully wrapped around them. Both men cease to struggle as they reflect on the poverty of their lives. Such a sentimental flourish is much in keeping with Kurosawa’s concerns, but utterly alien to the world of Murder My Sweet (Dmytryk, 1944), The Big Sleep (Hawks, 1946) or The Naked Kiss (Fuller, 1965); it would be equally unthinkable in the aesthetic universe of Pale Flower or Branded to Kill. Film noir is dependent on the isolation and crystallization of certain aspects of modern social experience (at least as Hollywood sees it) at the expense of other aspects, which must be removed. In order for moods such as alienation, anxiety and loneliness to come to the forefront, the sort of sentimentality found in Stray Dog must be suppressed.

In order to continue with these comparisons and contrasts, a working structural definition of film noir seems necessary and I am going to risk my own, with the proviso that such a definition is only useful if it casts a net that is wide enough to capture the broad phenomenon of film noir (Spicer 2002: vii) and to avoid essentialism (Naremore 1998: 5–11). My working assumption is that film noir is a complex of distinct elements, and that similar combinations of these elements are to be found in each of those films that have given rise to the term. These elements include certain techniques, such as high-contrast lighting; certain narrative patterns, such as a criminal scheme or the machinations of a femme fatale; certain psychological tropes, such as paranoia, hysteria, sadism and repression; and certain settings, such as ‘night in the city’. Definitions of movements or subgenres can never be airtight, but it is hard to find a film that has ever been considered to be a noir that does not prominently feature more than one of those elements named above.

There is a relative lack of evidence as to the historical reception of American crime films by Japanese directors, although Shinoda cites Robert Wise’s Odds Against Tomorrow (1957) as an influence, with high praise (Desjardins 2005: 122). Nevertheless, I argue that Pale Flower is an extremely self-conscious exercise in noir stylization, at least partially in explicit imitation of the American model. In pursuing this style, this film goes to visual extremes that are unmatched by anything in the American cycle and manages not only to self-consciously embody the look of noir, but extend it.

Of course, it is necessary to situate the film in the context of the history of Japanese studio production. First, like all of Shinoda’s early films, Pale Flower was
Shinoda’s Pale Flower as a Japanese film noir

made in the context of the loose, transgeneric movement called the ‘Japanese New Wave’ of the 1960s. Shinoda, Oshima, Imamura, and Yoshida were all apprentice directors at Shochiku studios with their own clear artistic ambitions, a willingness to engage with contemporary social and political concerns and a determination to push the envelope of film form and style. As the studio was dominated by Ozu and the genre of the ‘home drama’, its attitude towards its up and coming talent was ambivalent, at best. Ostensibly disapproving of youth-oriented material reliant on sex and violence, at the same time – as Shinoda tells us in a 2003 interview for the Home Vision DVD of Pale Flower – Shochiku hoped to revive its lagging box office with this very same material.

Pale Flower is also a yakuza movie, featuring most of the scenes and narrative highlights that had become essential to the genre, as Keiko McDonald has described: the ritual cutting off of a finger, the gambling scene, the climactic fight with a rival gang (1992: 175–76). Although Pale Flower initially was shelved and released a year later, both Shinoda and Donald Richie claim that the film in fact had a major influence on the ‘new’ yakuza film that was shortly to appear in the late 1960s (2005: 206), with its highlights of extreme violence, fast cutting, hand-held camera and a more ambivalent and ‘nihilistic’ take on the action and psychology of the yakuza hero.

Such newness is not immediately obvious from the plotline of Pale Flower, based on a story by Ishihara Shintaro. In Pale Flower, Muraki, a middle-aged, straight-laced yakuza (played by Ikebe Ryô), is released from prison. He takes up with the mysterious young Saeko (Kaga Mariko), an heiress who is ‘slumming it’ in the gambling joints of Asakusa. Together they float from game to game, but their relationship is never consummated. Muraki begins to fear that she will take up with Yoh, a half-Chinese dope addict and a killer on the lam, but before much of anything can happen to either character, Muraki once again agrees to kill someone for his boss. He goes back to prison, and later, on the inside, learns that Saeko was killed exactly as he had feared. What fascinates about Pale Flower is that it is so faithful, in a way, to the narrative staples of the yakuza genre, and yet at the same time remains formally and ideologically distinct from it, so much so that it may be more accurate to speak of it as an exemplary Japanese film noir rather than as a yakuza movie. Among those qualities that differentiate this film are its extremely complex narrative structure; its representation of character subjectivity, rich in both psychological and thematic depth and ambiguity; its montage, particularly in the infamous gambling sequences; and its elaborate high-contrast lighting.

Yet my determination to look at the film from the film noir angle is neither universally compelling nor uncontroversial. It could be argued that the film has as just as much in common with the European art cinema of the time – Antonioni, in particular – as it has with American noir. Pale Flower was produced just after the release of L’Eclisse/Eclipse (1963) and just before Il Deserto Rosso/Red Desert (1964), and the influence of Antonioni on the visual style appears to be substantial. To my knowledge, Shinoda has never cited Antonioni as an influence, but he was most likely aware of Italian modernist cinema (as evidenced e.g. by a 2002 Sight and Sound poll, in which Shinoda listed Amarcord [1973] and Pasolini’s Oedipus Rex [1967] as among the Ten Best Films ever made). Antonioni’s films were generally well known among the circle of young directors who comprised the Japanese New Wave, especially insofar as Antonioni was acquainted with Masumura Yasuzo, an influential precursor to the New Wave who studied at the Centro Sperimentale Cinematografico in 1950 (Rosenbaum 2002: 33).
The self-consciousness of Shinoda’s compositions and, in particular, his way of framing bodies in asymmetrical medium shots, arguably owes more to Antonioni’s influence than to either film noir or the dominant Japanese cinema practice. The restless, shifting camera, whether it moves or relies on montage, often places the characters in larger visual schema rather than isolating them as the centre of attention, and allows aspects of the physical environment (a gambling table, a darkened clock shop, a pretentious western-style restaurant) to stand out as the main visual interest in the shot. This echoes Antonioni’s technique of off-setting human interaction within architectural spaces and details that in turn creates mood and conveys emotional and psychological states, but in a much more ambiguous and open-ended manner than in expressionist cinema. Noel Burch characterizes Antonioni’s Cronaca di un Amore/Story of a Love Affair (1950) as a ballet between human figures and their settings, the cinematic spaces that they inhabit (1981: 76), and this is also appropriate for Pale Flower, in which medium and long shots of empty, dark spaces envelop the human figure, and in which people are often aligned and patterned to create a bizarre architecture of human figures. Like Burch’s Antonioni, Shinoda boldly embraces an aesthetic of ‘constant recomposition’ using ‘every conceivable technique’, particularly the unconventional framings and reframings of the human figure and the extreme changes in shot length and framing from one shot to the next (Burch 1981: 76).

But there are also important stylistic differences between Shinoda’s film and the work of the Italian master. Shinoda uses close-ups much more frequently than Antonioni, who is famous for keeping a physical and intellectual distance from his characters, and these are more brash and expressionistic than those found in most European art films. Antonioni’s montage, in addition to his plotting, is deceptively ‘incidental’ and discursive. Consequently his films lack the impression of directorial manipulation, denying a visual rhetoric of mastery. Shinoda’s montage, by contrast, is dynamic, forceful and self-conscious of its own controlling hand and is thus foregrounded as the film’s primary expressive technique. It would hardly be accurate to say that montage in Pale Flower gives an impression of strict narrative causality: the sequence of events is far too mysterious and enigmatic to be seen in terms of ordinary relations of cause and effect. But the dynamism and control of the montage is never in question, particularly in the main gambling sequences. In-frame movement, in general, takes a back seat to composition and montage as a vehicle for establishing a sense of disorientation.

Shinoda also uses high-contrast lighting with a consistency and extremity that has no analogue in the European art cinema of the 1960s – which by and large eschews stark expressionistic lighting in favour of softer, more naturalistic patterns – and that evidently owes much to film noir and German Expressionism. It is ‘mood lighting’, and the potential for light to create expressive atmosphere is exploited to the full. Correspondingly, the style of the film as a whole emphasizes immediate effect and lacks the sense of critical, intellectual distance or reserve associated with European art cinema (qualities that, although well disguised here, are frequently attributed to Shinoda’s later works). In the gambling scenes, the lighting is everywhere invested with a sinister force: as in film noir, darkness is a presence, rather than an absence.

There is, in accompaniment to the lighting, a sense of inexorability and psychological determination in relation to the characters that is markedly
Shinoda’s *Pale Flower* as a Japanese film noir

17
distinct from Antonioni’s typical existential indeterminacy and ‘aimlessness’. Certainly, an existentialist sensibility is a palpable presence in *Pale Flower*, as also is a mood of gradual and languorous despair. As a desperate reaction to the perception of nothingness, the main characters seek meaning in a dangerous exploration of their own limits. But if these characters, like Antonioni’s, suffer an existential awareness of a lack of externally given meaning, of the void, Shinoda remarkably integrates this one aspect of many post-war modernist film into a larger noir-like pattern of psychological determinism that, arguably, owes more to the fatalism of Lang and a good deal of American film noir. Although Shinoda’s two main characters are certainly enigmatic, they also seem to be fated by their dangerous drives and desires, to the extent that one can speak of a noir-like psychological causality. Shinoda even recreates an expressionist nightmare sequence in the style of *Murder My Sweet* in which Muraki has a proleptic vision of Saeko’s murder. Up to a point, the viewer can resort to (pop-)psychological explanations of motives and drives of the characters in order to understand their behaviour, conforming as it does to basic types and signifiers: Muraki and Saeko’s gambling addiction, Saeko’s thrill-seeking and attraction to dangerous characters, Muraki’s machismo, are understandable according to received psychological complexes well known to western and Japanese urban audiences, if only because of psychological clichés in other movies, novels and in the mass media. Despite the pronounced ambiguity and lack of causal logic to some of their actions, Muraki and Saeko seem to be clearly fated from the beginning as a result of destructive, uncontrollable drives. One might go so far as to describe Shinoda’s approach to character – especially in his anatomy of a relationship – as dialectical, with the ‘fatalistic causality’ of film noir at one pole and Antonioni’s famous ‘existential inscrutability’ at the other. Saeko and Muraki seem to be alternately driven by their dangerous appetites, and then to spend a great deal of time ‘doing nothing’, that is, making unpredictable choices that the viewer is not given sufficient means to understand, let alone identify with. Why is Saeko unable or unwilling to have a sexual relationship with Muraki, yet able to do so with the dangerous Yoh? Why, after taking up with the latter, does she remain compelled to seek out Muraki? What exactly is behind Muraki’s decision to go back to prison? How does he reconcile his self-denying loyalty to the *yakuza* code with the acknowledgement that the typical, highly ideological self-justifications of the *yakuza* actually mean nothing to him? The most important questions remain the most mysterious.

Joseph H. Lewis said of the young couple in his 1947 film, *Gun Crazy*, that ‘their love for each other was more fatal than their love for guns’ (Keser: 2006). If one replaces ‘love for guns’ with ‘love for gambling’, the comment may be applied with equal force to the couple in *Pale Flower*. Their mutual attraction turns out to be the greatest element of danger. This enigmatic and inexplicable dynamic between the two, fraught with erotic tension that has no apparent outlet or release, is the central mystery of the film. This dynamic dictates that carnality simply does not carry the necessary charge, the excitement. Hence, they seek dangerous erotic substitutions that embroil both of them in an increasingly negative game of one-upmanship, each partner trying to go higher than the other dares. Near the end of the film, Saeko, unable to resist such a dare, agrees to watch Muraki assassinate a rival gang boss, and he savagely proves to her that killing is the ultimate, and unsurpassable, kick. This final lesson is not conducive to Saeko’s well-being, however. While Muraki is away in jail, Saeko meets her end in a messy ‘combination of drugs
and lust’. Perhaps no price, not even life, is too high to pay for Muraki to prove that he and he alone is a suitable match for her.

When Muraki learns of her death, he says, in the last line of the film, ‘With Saeko dead, I yearn for her body and soul’. This may strike some viewers as remorseful. But in my interpretation, the line suggests that only now, in prison, does Muraki yearn for Saeko’s body, when he refused to pursue her sexually beforehand. As in many films noirs, there is a possibility that Muraki has gotten exactly what he wanted with the murder of Saeko. For Muraki, love is only possible in death. Muraki’s final erotic apotheosis – his yearning desire for the murdered body of Saeko – plays out like a brooding, self-obsessed romanticism, a perverse attempt to create a ‘pure aesthetic where the beautiful is valued more than life itself’ (Satô 1982: 232). Murder turns out to be Muraki’s erotic jouissance, his only adequate stimulus. But the process and the attainment of it seem angst-ridden and doomed to ‘incompleteness’ for Muraki, even as he must necessarily pursue it at any cost to others and to society. Yet, earlier in the film, he confesses his ability to ‘forgive himself’ for his murderous proclivities, by asserting that it is all a matter of social, environmental and psychological fate. Shinoda himself has never hinted at the more disturbing psychological aspects of Pale Flower, even despite the emphasis on l’amour fou, criminal psychology, and violence in a film that, for Shinoda, was meant to accomplish an investigation into contemporary social morality (Desjardins 2005: 123). But perhaps, in the process of so carefully adapting the American noir to his own (largely socio-political) vision, he has given us a Japanese noir with more disruptive ramifications than he himself was aware of.

In sum, then, Pale Flower – a film complexly situated within both the yakuza genre and the Japanese New Wave – adopts a number of characteristic aspects of European art cinema, but these are literally and figuratively ‘overshadowed’, as it were, by the formal and thematic influence of film noir: extreme high-contrast lighting, a sense of fatalism and visual disorientation and a psychological causality of inter-subjective relations leading only to violence.

REFERENCES


Spicer, Andrew (2002), Film Noir, London: Longman.
SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS
Peter Yacavone is currently a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. He received a Bachelor of Arts, with honours, from Brown University in 2001, followed by an M. Phil. in European Literature from Oxford University in 2003. In 2010, he received an M.A. in Comparative Literature with a Certificate in Graduate Film Studies from the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Contact: Department of Film and Television Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7HS, UK.
E-mail: P.A.Yacavone@warwick.ac.uk
World Film Locations
Tokyo
EDITED BY CHRIS MAGEE

ISBN 9781841504834 | Paperback | UK £9.95 | US $18

From *Tokyo Story* to *Godzilla, You Only Live Twice* to *Enter the Void, World Film Locations: Tokyo* presents a kaleidoscopic view of one of the world’s most exciting cities through the lens of cinema. Illustrated throughout with dynamic screen shots, this volume in Intellect’s World Film Location series spotlights fifty key scenes from classic and contemporary films shot in Tokyo, accompanied by insightful essays that take us from the wooden streets of pre-nineteenth-century Edo to the sprawling ‘what-if’ megalopolis of science fiction and fantasy anime. Important themes and players – among them Akira Kurosawa, Samuel Fuller, and Sofia Coppola – are individually considered. For the film scholar, or for all those who love Japanese cinema and want to learn more, *World Film Locations: Tokyo* will be an essential guide.

CHRIS MAGEE is founder and editor of *Toronto Film P wav-W ow*, the premiere Japanese film blog in Canada, and a programmer and artistic director of the Shinsei Cinema Festival, a showcase of new and independent film from Japan that takes place annually at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto.

Part of the World Film Locations series