

Ferdinand Liefert

Film Festival Review

22nd Nippon Connection 2022

Embracing the Stories of Youth

After two years, Nippon Connection, the Japanese film festival, finally returned to theaters in Frankfurt am Main. The main focus of the 2022 edition, held 24–29 May, was “Stories of Youth – Coming of Age”.

As in previous years, a wide spectrum of films – over 100 in total – were shown during the festival, from blockbusters to independent films, from animated films to documentaries, from films shot by veteran directors to films by newcomers, and including both feature-length and short films.

In addition, food stalls, Japanese craft stalls (such as origami), live performances, and other activities (e.g. Zen meditation) were also part of the event. While to some degree this additional programming contributed to broadening the audience’s horizon, some of the events also seemed to feed clichés of what is supposedly a “typically Japanese” experience.

Diversity

The title “Stories of Youth – Coming of Age” provided a broad thematic focus covering a range of aspects. Here I will focus on just three of them: issues of diversity, the struggles young people are facing, and their relationship to religious beliefs.

Many of the films shown this year deal with diversity in one respect or another. Several movies dealt with LGBTQ+ topics, others with disability, some with discrimination or racism. *NINJA GIRL (SHUSHUSHU NO MUSUME, Irie Yû, JP 2021)* is an unconventional example of the last of these. It is an interesting take to let a ninja – this icon of Japanese popular culture – tackle a racist ordinance. Ninja Girl’s grandfather, who always opposed legislation that would exclude foreigners from the town, reveals to his granddaughter

that they belong to a ninja family. He orders his granddaughter to fight against the lawmakers who introduced the legislation and reverse it. The soundtrack of the film is highly influenced by 1980s disco sounds. While the humorous film with its many surprising twists is surely remarkable, it also includes a romantic storyline, with the female ninja falling in love with a male character, a narrative that seems superfluous and undermines somewhat the strength of the female protagonist.

The Struggle of Young People

Youth can often be a time of overwhelming and sometimes diverging feelings. Furthermore, it is a time when people might start to ask themselves which life they want to live and what career they aim to pursue. Many of the films told such stories surrounding struggles faced by youth. In *SMALL, SLOW BUT STEADY* (KEIKO, ME WO SUMASETE, Shô Miyake, JP/FR 2022) the audience gets to know the professional boxer Keiko, who was born with a hearing impairment. After a particularly hard fight, she begins to develop doubts about her boxing career. At the same time, her long-time supporter and chief trainer decides to close down the boxing hall. Keiko is unsure if she should enter the ring again, before her trainer quits. It appears that making that decision is one of her hardest fights. The film is shot in a realistic fashion, with warm brown tones prominent throughout. The overall aesthetic adds to a certain vintage style. While the character of Keiko is complex, the depiction of others, for example her brother, comes closer to stereotype.

Struggling with Faith

“Youth” includes both young people who are already part of the work force (*shakai jin*) and adolescents still in school. The film *UNDER THE STARS* (HOSHI NO KO, Tatsushi Omori, JP 2020) tells the story of a schoolgirl in her teens whose parents are members of a fictive New Religious Movement. Fictive New Religious Movements have been depicted in Japanese films before, for example in *LOVE EXPOSURE* (AI NO MUKIDASHI, Sion Sono, JP 2008) and *SPECIAL ACTORS* (Shinichiro Ueda, JP 2019). The directors of these films express a critical view of those groups, using well-known clichés to portray them as caricatures, or proposing that they are a scam, or focusing on their authoritarian nature.

While the director of *UNDER THE STARS* seems to share this critical perspective, this film is a more nuanced example of the reception of New Religious Movements in Japanese cinema. The film focuses on an aspect often connected with New Religious Movements, not only in Japan – health and healing. A couple does not know what to do after their daughter, Chihiro, becomes sick as a young child and ordinary medicine does not seem to work in her case. Instead, “Venus water”, a product used by followers of a religious group, helps their daughter eventually recover. The family then become firm believers and practitioners. Later, Chihiro is largely able to live the life of a normal teenager. However, the people around her express scepticism about the religious group she belongs to. She begins to question the faith of her parents. The actors’ performances make the film an absorbing experience. Flashbacks to early childhood memories are sometimes surprising, since they interrupt the linear plot, and during the last part the audience might not fully understand why a certain problem appears. Although a rather conventional technique, the non-linear structure adds an unusual note to the school drama that provides ample food for thought, even if the open ending may not be satisfactory for everyone.

Nippon Connection: A Glimpse into Japanese Cinema and Society

The festival provides a glimpse into the wide range of Japanese film productions. While some of the cultural activities that were part of the program may not have helped deconstruct clichés about Japan and what is considered “Japanese”, the films allow viewers to see more aspects of life and culture in Japan. Unsurprisingly, the films also reflect current social discourses. Just before the Tokyo Olympics, discussions about LGBTQ+ rights and disability took off in Japan, and some of the films in this year’s line-up reflected these debates in their stories. Others dealt with racism or corruption. In Japanese cinema, religion is often portrayed in terms of everyday religious practices like funeral ceremonies or memorial rites. Buddhism or Shintō are rarely dealt with in a discursive manner in Japanese cinema. At the same time New Religious Movements are often depicted as problematic in one way or another, as also became apparent in *UNDER THE STARS*.

With its wide range of films and activities, the festival again offered visitors the opportunity to gain a sense of current trends in Japanese cinema

as well as current debates in Japanese society. The main focus, “Stories of Youth – Coming of Age”, introduced viewers to the diversity of young people in Japan and their hopes and struggles, and also to their search for meaning in life by relating to religious issues, although – more often – not explicitly in a religious manner.

Filmography

LOVE EXPOSURE (AI NO MUKIDASHI, Sion Sono, JP 2008).

NINJA GIRL (SHUSHUSHU NO MUSUME, Irie Yû, JP 2021).

SMALL, SLOW BUT STEADY (KEIKO, ME WO SUMASETE, Shô Miyake, JP/FR 2022).

SPECIAL ACTORS (Shinichiro Ueda, JP 2019).

UNDER THE STARS (HOSHI NO KO, Tatsushi Omori, JP 2020).