

# THE RAMBLING GUITARIST: GENDER, GENRE, AND ARCHETYPES IN NIKKATSU ACTION'S MUKOKUSEKI EIGA

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## ABSTRACT

For Japan's oldest film studio Nikkatsu, the late-'50s and early-'60s represented a rapidly evolving, cosmopolitan playground in which Eastern and Western influences could be collided together in an explosive mix that ultimately resulted in movies that felt quite apart from either. These were the *mukokuseki eiga* (borderless or of no nationality), typified by Nikkatsu's nine-part *wataridori* (wanderer) series produced from 1959-1962. The first film in the series, *The Rambling Guitarist* (*Gitaa o motta wataridori*), stands as a prime candidate through which to better understand the precise appeal of these films as well as the way their settings and characters captured a new, worldly aesthetic. Through a close analysis of *The Rambling Guitarist*, and more specifically, the way it presents and challenges various gender archetypes, this essay will look to present a snapshot of what Nikkatsu Action represented, straddling the borderline between two camps; East and West, old and new, tradition and modernity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## INTRODUCTION

Nikkatsu Action - a new, exciting cinematic genre to cater to a new, exciting generation of Japanese youth who were quickly developing an appetite for the blend of Eastern and Western influences that characterised Japan in the 1950s and '60s. Film critic and scholar Mark Schilling details in his book *No Borders No Limits*, “To young audiences growing to adulthood in post-war Japan, that mix was not just fantasy: it reflected the Western influences all around them”.[1] And yet, while this mix was “not just fantasy,” it retained an element of the imaginary; namely that these notions of East and West existed purely as tropes; abstract concepts created purely through mediums such as cinema itself, or via popular products and marketing. The very appeal of this fantasy was that it situated Japanese cinema as part of a wider global (i.e., predominantly Western) cinema, allowing it to draw on a cinematic language and aesthetic symbolism developed abroad whilst pairing it with uniquely Japanese content.[2]

Schilling's book represents one of the few in-depth studies to date on the subject of Nikkatsu's action movie output, with these films typically glossed over in wider studies of Japanese cinema due to their disposability as populist B-movie content. Little individual auteurist input is attributed to them, and more famed, artistically inclined directors such as Seijun Suzuki are typically prioritised in histories of this era. As such, the opportunity to glean valuable insights in terms of the kinds of representations of gender stereotypes, aesthetics, and ideals that Japanese audiences of the time valued have been largely missed so far.[3]

Released in 1959, *The Rambling Guitarist* (*Gitaa o motta wataridori*) is the first in the nine-film *wataridori* (wanderer) series produced by Nikkatsu from 1959-1962. Directed by Buichi Saito and starring Akira Kobayashi in the leading role of the titular wanderer Shinji Taki, the film plays out in the northern port town of Hakodate as Taki finds himself embroiled with the local yakuza. Mob boss Akitsu (Nobuo Kaneko) tasks Taki with evicting a family-run fishery, and it is within this context that Taki must also contend with a romantic entanglement with Akitsu's daughter (Ruriko Asaoka), as well as a recurring foe from the past in the form of pistol-wielding hitman George (Joe Shishido).

January 2016 saw *The Rambling Guitarist* released on home video for the first time in the UK via a new high-definition Blu-ray transfer on Arrow Video's Nikkatsu Diamond Guys compilation set [4]; directly referencing the film's position within the wider context of Nikkatsu's powerful star system of the time, in which their lineup of Diamond Guys would slot interchangeably into their latest action movies.[5] With this powerful stable of big-name, male talent at their disposal, Nikkatsu was able to efficiently crank out an immense volume of highly populist material. While often referred to as belonging to pulp movie culture[6], it is precisely for this reason that the Nikkatsu Action films make for such an intriguing case study. Working within the medium of bold character types and off-the-hanger genre tropes, there is a marked standard by which to measure the way these films present themselves to their audience.

As Tom Mes writes in the booklet that accompanies the Arrow Video release of the film: “The Rambling Guitarist is as archetypal a genre film as can be. But it is also jauntily playful with those archetypes, making it an exuberant reminder of the timeless, and borderless, appeal of popular cinema.”[7]

[1] Schilling, Mark (2007) *No Borders No Limits*. Godalming: FAB Press, p.5.

[2] Russell, Catherine (2010) *Japanese cinema in the global system: an Asian classical cinema in China Review*, pp.15-36.

[3] Field, Simon (1994) *Branded to thrill: the delirious cinema of Suzuki Seijun*. London: British Film Inst.

[4] (2016) *Nikkatsu Diamond Guys* Volume 1. Shenley: Arrow Video.

[5] Powers, Richard, Hidetoshi Katō, Bruce Stronach (eds.) (1989) *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, p.119.

[6] Miller, Adam Lee (2018) 'Color and Chaos: Unpacking the mise-en-scène of Tokyo Drifter's reshot finale. *Mise-en-scène*'. *The Journal of Film & Visual Narration*, 3(2).

[7] Mes, Tom (2016) 'North By Northwest: The timeless adventures of a rambling guitarist' in *Nikkatsu Diamond Guys* Volume 1. Shenley: Arrow Video, p.34.

The question of well-known tropes such as tradition and modernity, or the dynamic between East and West, is an important one to consider in relation to the film's status as a populist work; namely, works produced within a systematic construct of familiar stars, directors, studios, and genres in thousands of theatres across Japan.[8] Here, audience reception could be courted and standardised; appetites for particular kinds of characters and tropes smoothed into a formulaic equation that built on what came before, informed by a built-in audience awareness of what they were consuming. Thus, a reading of a film like *The Rambling Guitarist* is one inherently linked to its open engagement (to an almost obsessive degree) with tropes, and the cultural mixing this allows it to engage with.

### A MAN'S WORLD - MASCULINE POWER AND HONOUR

As part of Nikkatsu Action's production-line output of Diamond Guys films, *The Rambling Guitarist* is by definition a star-vehicle movie, precision designed to present male lead Akira Kobayashi in the most attractive way possible. From his dress sense (T-shirt and leather jacket) to his ability to handle himself in a fight, his every move within the film is a calculated effort to evoke a clear sense of cool. While his persona as a kind of Japanese Elvis,[9] who sings and charms his way through Hakodate is arguably riddled with cliché and excess (the theme song that Kobayashi sings in the movie is repeated no fewer than six times), it is these same elements that shape the character of Taki into something embodying just as much of the mukokuseki aesthetic as the film's East-meets-West setting. His titular guitar might ooze Western style and stand as the most overt signifier of an old-school cowboy feel, but crucially, the song he's singing is in Japanese. What's more, the pop tune feel of the song openly amplifies the film's already populist aesthetic; in essence replicating auditorily what the film attempts to do visually. Indeed, the fact the film's theme song is essentially sung in character by Taki within the film itself almost adds a kind of knowingly meta quality to the way the film is aware of its own engagements with cinematic clichés.

Taki's initial guise as a lonely wanderer morphs once he enters Hakodate and signs up as hired muscle for gang boss Akitsu. His initial reservations make him out as a man of morals: "I hate bullying the weak," he tells Akitsu, setting the stage for a classic exploration of the themes of *giri* and *ninjo*. Hiroshi Kitamura lays the groundwork for the theme's significance in his essay "Shoot-Out In Hokkaido: The 'Wanderer' (*Wataridori*) Series and the Politics of Transnationality." "In his autobiography, [Akira] Kobayashi wrote that the protagonist's motivation to help society in the Wanderer series stems from his sense of 'duty' (*giri*) and 'compassion' (*ninjo*)."[10]

By agreeing to work for Akitsu, Taki ties himself into the *giri* system; one of complete obedience to his superior. But this obedience clearly stands at odds with his inner moral compass; while Taki might enjoy knocking back drinks, chatting up pretty girls and taking on odd jobs for the yakuza, the film makes it clear he is a fundamentally good man at heart. This is best symbolised in an early scene where Taki meets a young boy who has lost his balloon; Taki immediately steps in and offers to buy him a new one, with some candy thrown in to boot. The message is plain: what kind of hardened criminal would buy a balloon for a kid? While the lovable rogue archetype is a common one within Western cinema,[11] its adaptation and reflection within Japanese cinematic tradition is given additional depth by the audience's assumed knowledge of the symbolic weight at play in Taki's attempts to balance himself between the pull of *giri* and *ninjo*. In essence, just as the film itself exudes a strong sense of transnationality, the character of Taki himself exists as a blurred melange of Western archetype as viewed through a distinctly Japanese sense of morality.

[8] Russell, Catherine (2011) *Classical Japanese cinema revisited*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, pp.1-3.

[9] Desser, David (2017) 'Crazed Heat: Nakahira Ko And The Transnational Self-Remake' in *Transnational Film Remakes*, p.164.

[10] Kitamura, Hiroshi (2012) 'Shoot-Out In Hokkaido: The "Wanderer" (*Wataridori*) series and the politics of transnationality' in *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: The Reel Asian Exchange*. New York & London: Routledge, p.38.

[11] Spicer, Andrew (2003) *Typical men: The representation of masculinity in popular British cinema*. London: IB Tauris, p.4.

All this ties into a deep-rooted system of signs and symbolism, fundamental to the successful workings of a genre film. Steve Neale defines this aspect as iconography [12], and details how, by applying this concept to cinema, we are able to glean far more from an individual movie by placing it in context with our knowledge of other movies of that type. It is this approach that, crucially, allows us to view *The Rambling Guitarist* as more than simply a piece of disposable, populist cinema as seen in isolation, but instead representative of a broader reflection of values, trends, and tropes. In essence, the film becomes indicative of a system of visual conventions or patterns of imagery, which McArthur illustrates as:

“those surrounding the physical presence, attitudes and dress of the actors and the characters they play; those emanating from the milieu within which the characters operate; and those connected with the technology at the characters’ disposal” [13]

An understanding of this system of visual conventions is important because it allows us to place the fundamentally good character of Taki in stark contrast to his key rival in the film; the hired hitman George, memorably played by the puffy-cheeked Joe Shishido. Arriving thirty-three minutes into the film’s run time, George (whose Western name only furthers the mukokuseki feel of the movie) is immediately marked as a bad character by the prominent scar on his cheek (physical presence), his disparaging comments about women and the fact he cheats at a dice game with Taki (attitudes), as well as the fact he is most frequently shown cradling a pistol (technology at his disposal) and shoots seagulls for target practice. Indeed, we might go as far as to read the gun and George’s foreign name in combination as an implicit nod to his foreign nature. While both he and Taki represent a blending of East and West in different ways, it is worth noting that the hero (Taki) is the one to bear the Japanese name, while George is prefigured far more in the guise of an other. With the film’s 1959 release subsequent to the end of the American occupation of Japan in 1952,[14] this could even be read with a kind of nationalist subtext; a trumping of the foreigner by a reempowered Japanese masculinity (one which has crucially absorbed and learnt from the West).

On a simpler level however, with good and bad set in clear opposition to each other, the film’s fundamental nature as a genre work is allowed to fully click into motion. The conventions of populist action cinema tell us that a showdown between Taki and George is inevitable, and so our anticipation for this is formulaically increased through a series of almost encounters such as the aforementioned dice game. This is further emphasised by the fact that Joe Shishido had form for playing these types of characters, as Mark Schilling comments: “Joe Shishido became a Nikkatsu star by portraying characters who often begin as hitmen, conmen and other disreputable types, but end up on the side of the hero, if not always the angels.”[15]

Here, we return to the notion of *giri* and *ninjo*, which like the opposition of good and bad, achieve so much of their dynamic narrative drive from the fact (as a convention) the audience knows the film must move inexorably toward a point where the characters must make a fundamental choice between the two. Both Taki and George are forced to decide between continuing to blindly obey Akitsu (*giri*) or to do what they feel is morally right (*ninjo*). While to a certain degree it is obvious that Taki, as the hero of the film, will make the right decision, things are left more open-ended with George; which all helps to arguably make him the most morally complex (and interesting) character in the film.

[12] Neale, Steve (2000) *Genre and Hollywood*. New York & London: Routledge, p.12.

[13] McArthur, Colin (1972) *Underworld USA*. New York: Viking Adult, p.24.

[14] Bailey, Paul John (1996) *Postwar Japan: 1945 to the present*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.43.

[15] Schilling, Mark (2007), p.75.

As the film progresses, we begin to see that George, while outwardly cruel, has hidden depths. Via a flashback, we are shown how he and Taki (during his previous role as a policeman) previously met in Kobe; with Taki gunning down George's friend. George longs for retribution, telling Taki: "He was my only partner. I'll take revenge for his death. I won't be a coward like you." And yet, in the very next scene - when the standoff between George and Taki is interrupted by the arrival of a marine patrol, George quips: "We'll put our duel on hold. I play fair."

Here, we see the purest distillation of the codes of gentlemanly honour and chivalry George holds himself to account to. At numerous points in the film he could have ostensibly finished Taki off, and yet he feels compelled to constantly frame their showdowns in the context of a game. This reaches its natural conclusion in a surreal sequence near the film's finale where Taki and George both stand, Western shoot-out style, with two pool tables between them. In their hands they each hold a pool ball, which at the count of three they will drop and then quickly pick up their guns from the pool tables and fire one shot at each other. Taki, inevitably, wins this contest; and George, once again seemingly compelled by his own personal honour, chooses to give himself up to the police and is arrested.

Isolde Standish frames this kind of honour code as specifically masculine, and belonging to another traditional Japanese concept, *jingi*, which she describes as governing "male-male relations and is in fact synonymous with the more commonly accepted moral code of *giri ninjo*... both of which can be rendered in English as 'justice and humanity.'" [16] This reflection of a traditional, Japanese moral backing adds a further dynamic to the East-West fusion of the film, adding to and subverting the more arbitrary cinematic trope of good versus evil and ensuring that while the film rests within the cinematic scope of this arguably crude binary opposition, it comes with a built-in further resonance for Japanese audiences.

In addition, the specificity of male-male relations in regard to the idea of *jingi* is important because it places both George and Taki's actions in a sphere of reference which is inherently competitive. As a man, who is strongest? Who can drink the most? Who can romance the prettiest girls? Who is the most honourable? Who is the most manly? If we consider *The Rambling Guitarist* as a kind of male power fantasy, with Taki as an aspirational self-insert character for the audience, these notions of masculinity must inherently be measured against other men to be fully realised, either within the film itself, with other films of its type, or within society at large. Standish's framing of the concept builds on the theories of Ikegami, who places these masculine ideas of honour within the long-standing tradition of the samurai:

"When a samurai regulates his own behaviour based upon considerations of what is deemed 'honourable', he has an imagined community, or a symbolic reference group, in his mind that carries his reputation and social dignity." [17]

It is this same self-regulation that we see time and time again in the character of George, whose notion of honour is evidently formed from his measuring of his own masculinity against others, such as Taki. For George, when he says "I'm not a coward" or "I play fair," he reinforces a wider societal (or at the very least, a cinematic ideal) of what masculinity stands for, and to do otherwise would be to utterly destroy the self-conceived social dignity he sees himself operating within, despite his role in the lawless criminal underworld. As Standish further notes: "The principle difference between practitioners of the code of *jingi* and those of *giri ninjo*, is that they exist in a community which operates on the margins of 'legitimate' social institutions," [18] just as George and Taki do, within Akitsu's murky yakuza world.

[16] Standish, Isolde (2013) *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema: Towards a Political Reading of the Tragic Hero*. London: Routledge, p.162.

[17] Ikegami, Eiko (1995) *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.38.

[18] Standish, Isolde (2013), p.162.

This notion of marginal communities returns us once again to the borderless, elusive quality of the Nikkatsu Action films. By definition, the titular wanderer of the wataridori series is a man who never wholly exists within a community; his existence there is purely transitory. Taki, as wanderer, is seen as a figure in isolation, cast against the inherent group of the yakuza; he must make his own decisions, but crucially must figure them against preexisting honour codes and constructs within the urban environment that exists apart from the individuality of his transient wanderer lifestyle. In a world where the rules of legitimate society never really quite apply to Taki, it is instead against the film's other key players and the character archetypes they represent that we must measure him (and that Taki, too, must measure himself). And just as the film's Eastern qualities must inherently contrast with its Western overtones, so too must its depiction of femininity contrast with its masculinity.

### THE GIRL NEXT DOOR - EVOLVING WITH THE TIMES

For every Diamond Guy outing, it was typical for Nikkatsu Action to pair the male lead with an equally attractive female; again, from a stable of regular talent who would appear time and time again. In the wataridori series, this came in the form of actress Ruriko Asaoka. The original trailer for the film even pairs her and Kobayashi together as “The pride of Nikkatsu, the charming duo,” referencing their previous appearance together earlier that year in *Farewell to Southern Tosa (Nangoku Tosa o ato ni shite)*, also directed by Buichi Saito. The duo had form, and Nikkatsu was ready to milk their on-screen dynamic for all it was worth.

Mark Schilling begins his mini-biography of Asaoka in *No Borders No Limits* in largely aesthetic terms: ‘[her] on-screen image was slightly exotic, excitingly modern. With her slim, petite figure, she may not have been a Hollywood glamour queen, but her big eyes, small face, full lips and slender, perfectly proportioned legs made her an Audrey Hepburn-like stand-out.’ [19] Evidently, Asaoka's core role within *The Rambling Guitarist* is to act as visual allure, and this is important to consider because for all that her character Yuki plays the epitome of the modern girl, dressing in fancy Western clothes, playing Chopin on the piano, and driving a flashy car, the foundations of her character, like Taki, are built on far more traditionally Japanese roots.

In late 1950s Japan, models of Japanese femininity were still heavily influenced by traditional ideals of the woman as a selfless, subservient paragon of domesticity.[20] This ideal was one rooted in obedience, ultimately in service to an established patriarchy. With this in mind, it is useful to observe how cinematic depictions of Japanese women might capture their failing to perform the new, Western modernity. Their aesthetic aspiration for the West is nuanced by the intermixing with traditionalist Eastern models of correct behaviour. The character of Yuki embodies this perfectly; the majority of her actions within *The Rambling Guitarist* are with either Taki (the love interest) or her father Akitsu (patriarchy). When Akitsu says to Taki: “When did I give you permission to take out my daughter?” we see Yuki's status as an individual succinctly negated; within the context of the film, she is allowed to exist only as an adjunct to a man; so much so that she is in effect, blinded to everything else going on around her.

As the film draws towards its climax, Yuki finally confronts her father about his shady line of work, and the naïve, black-and-white way she has envisioned the world up until now is made clear:

YUKI: “You were a perfect father to me, but a demon to the rest of the world.”

AKITSU: “Everything I do is for your happiness.”

YUKI: “I don't need that kind of happiness, as long as I can be proud of you.”

[19] Schilling, Mark (2007), p.65.

[20] Schooler, Carmi, and Karen C. Smith (1978) “... and a Japanese wife.” Social structural antecedents of women's role values in Japan. *Sex Roles*, 4(1), pp.23-41.

The implication being, of course, that even now, her happiness is still symbiotically linked to the pride she desires to feel for her father, rather than any kind of individually defined happiness for herself. Kelsky sees this kind of relationship as a deprivation of the independent subjectivity of women, in which an internationalist modernity is seen as giving them an exit route towards unfettered freedom, but which a feudalistic male establishment ultimately denies them.[21] Against this backdrop, there also remains a friction between our present-day viewing of the film, bringing with us our own ideals for feminine individuality, and the figure of Yuki, who seems to us unfairly shackled to an older model of how a woman should be.

In contrast to the patriarchally dominated Yuki, we are given a powerful symbol of new femininity and the changing societal roles of women in Sumiko (played by Sanae Nakahara), the wife of the fishery-owner, and more significantly, Akitsu's sister. When Taki and his lackeys first visit the fishery, we are immediately shown that the owner is reserved and cowardly while Sumiko herself is far more outspoken and bold than her husband. This is reaffirmed later as Akitsu explains: "She refused the marriage I arranged for her and married that coward instead. She ignored my wishes. I'll never forget that." His possessiveness is inflamed by his sister's blatant flouting of his authority, and in one of the film's most powerful scenes, we see Sumiko confront Akitsu while Yuki, the perfect kept daughter, sings a song downstairs, all dolled up in a fancy Western dress. Sumiko, notably, is wearing a sharp business suit in this scene; her clothing delineating a woman of purpose and societal drive, whereas in contrast Yuki is reduced to a pretty ornament.

This juxtaposition is crucial, as in the following dialogue, Akitsu directly contrasts the situations of Sumiko, his sister, and Yuki, his daughter. "If you hadn't gone there you could have lived the good life, like Yuki," he tells Sumiko, damning her marriage to the cowardly fishery owner again. "Don't you feel envious? Is hardship fun? Don't you understand how I feel? How much I care for you? You're going to defy me?" Akitsu's interrogatory questions highlight just how ingrained his ideas of masculine dominance are; he simply cannot comprehend Sumiko's reasoning for pursuing her own life choices instead of meekly following what he had envisioned for her. As Jennifer Coates discusses in *Making Icons: Repetition and the Female Image in Japanese Cinema, 1945–1964*: "Young working women... presented a potential threat to the patriarchal social order in their adoption of new roles in the public rather than domestic sphere, challenging pre-war and wartime ideals." [22]

The changing roles of women is not the only theme; we see *The Rambling Guitarist* handling a mix of old and new archetypes. In 1956, Nikkatsu had seen massive success with its zeitgeist capturing *taiyozoku* (sun tribe) films such as *Season of the Sun (Taiyō no kisetsu)* and *Crazed Fruit (Kurutta kajitsu)*. Sexually charged and depicting a powerful cocktail of youthful excess, the films sparked public outcry for the example they might have been setting for impressionistic young audiences of the time "forced Nikkatsu to soften its edges" [23], laying the framework for the more muted manner in which *The Rambling Guitarist* handles the topic of sex.

The *taiyozoku* films engaged powerful symbolism to portray their deep-rooted sexuality, from the gentle lapping of seaweed in the ocean waves (*Crazed Fruit*) to the stark implication of a man thrusting his erect penis through a traditional Japanese shoji paper screen (*Season of the Sun*) [24]. The closest *The Rambling Guitarist* gets to this kind of sensuality between its young couple comes in a scene where Yuki comes to wake Taki up, asking him out on a date. Taki unabashedly begins to pull off his nightwear, and Yuki quickly turns round, visibly embarrassed. Here we see the perfect echo of the virginal ambience [25] of the Japanese girl-next-door archetype, paired with Taki's status as the chaste warrior.

[21] Kelsky, Karen (2001) *Women on the verge: Japanese women, Western dreams*. Durham: Duke University Press, p.4.

[22] Coates, Jennifer (2016) *Making Icons: Repetition and the Female Image in Japanese Cinema, 1945–1964*. Hong Kong: Kong Kong University Press, p.136.

[23] Kitamura, Hiroshi (2012), p.34.

[24] Sherif, Ann (2009) *Japan's Cold War: Media, Literature, and the Law*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.184.

[25] Barrett, Gregory (1989), p.201.

As Barrett puts it: “All ideal Japanese warriors then become chaste in their single-minded devotion to battle”[26]. Taki might entertain an interest in pretty girls (there was even a former lover in the past), but crucially his romance within the film itself is never consummated. To do so would be to weaken his more primary role as a masculine brawler; the connotation being that his status as a hard, muscular fighter remains cinematically (and bodily) incompatible with that of a tender lover, emotionally sensitive to a woman’s desires.

Reaching the film’s finale, we see Taki board a ferry and depart Hakodate for new horizons while Yuki sees him off. While on one hand there is poignancy to this wistful, melodramatic final farewell, it also brings with it a bitter irony as Yuki scathingly admonishes herself for turning a blind eye to her father’s criminal activities: “I was a bad daughter,” she says. “The next time we meet, I promise I’ll be a better daughter.”

Returning to Barrett’s *Archetypes In Japanese Film*, we are given a neat summary of the kind of girl Yuki ultimately represents: “The inactive existence of suffering beauties in films is often predicated on the fact that they are wrenched from a sheltered life with their parents and cannot live in the cruel world without the protection or at least support of a man.”[27]

In this damning indictment of Yuki’s character (as well as, perhaps, the trope she represents) as the perpetual suffering beauty, the film’s ending takes on an almost mean-spirited nature. While Taki, in all his powerful, unfettered masculinity, is free to move on as he wills to begin another adventure, Yuki, the bad daughter, is now left completely disenfranchised and powerless; still chained to the town itself. Her father is dead, and her apparent saviour, Taki, has left. With the two most significant men in her life now absent, there is a pitiful desperation in her final lines: “He’s never coming back. I know.”

In this, we see a stark contrast with the kind of tough, earthy woman that would emerge in subsequent years, typified by the heroine of Shohei Imamura’s 1961 film *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta to gunkan*). There, in an inversion of the ending to *The Rambling Guitarist*, it is the heroine who finally achieves freedom at the end of the film; with her male love interest dead, she neatly swerves the expected route of continuing to service the American GIs, and instead leaves town for good.[28] Donald Richie neatly sums the dilemma up: “the Japanese woman is a fitting symbol of a problem which many face: how to learn to be yourself in a society that doesn’t want you.”[29]

In the blended East-meets-West world of Nikkatsu’s mukokuseki films, a girl like Yuki is only as real as the cinematic archetypes she stands for; the visual appeal of the flashy, modern West paired with the staid traditionalism of the East. Torn between the two, she ultimately becomes as plastic and intangible as the film itself, in plain opposition to the kind of gritty, realistic femininity Shohei Imamura would populate his films with. Yuki, in essence, is merely a fantasy - a dream woman that tries to combine East and West in service to populist entertainment (or, we might argue, is produced systematically as part and parcel of this self-same populist aesthetic itself). She is, in essence, an attempt to encapsulate a pure, made-to-order characterisation of femininity; a pureness dictated by the mores of box office supply-and-demand. It is to this concept of pure entertainment that we must turn next.

## NEITHER HERE NOR THERE - BORDERLESS SPACES AND THE FREEDOM OF POPULIST JOY

In describing the unique hybrid settings of the Nikkatsu Action films, Mark Schilling employs the phrase *internationalised spaces*,[30] epitomised in the aesthetic of the Eastern Westerns of which *The Rambling Guitarist* is an obvious example.

[26] Barrett, Gregory (1989), p.44.

[27] Barrett, Gregory (1989), p.195.

[28] Quandt, James (ed.) (1999) *Shohei Imamura*. Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, p.173.

[29] Richie, Donald (2001) *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, p.193.

[30] Schilling, Mark (2007), p.154.

The notion of internationalised space is symbolised in a striking visual reference within the opening minutes of the film; a brief preamble shows Taki travelling on the back of a horse-drawn cart through the dusty wilds of Hokkaido. Pure Western, evoking classic John Ford vistas.[31] But in the very next scene, we are shown a city street at nighttime, full of neon-lit signs in Japanese script. Taki has suddenly arrived at one of the town's many drinking dens; we are never shown how he entered the town, and the transition point between the wild and the urban remains elusive.[32] What remains is the continual notion of a fantastical playground - one in which further opportunities for freedom are enabled.

It is this notion of freedom that forms the core of Gregory Barrett's discussion of mukokuseki eiga, as he outlines how Akira Kobayashi's hero in the wataridori series is just as elusive as the abstract *No Nation Land* the films are set in: "Entering the new No Nation Land like a phantom from out of nowhere and in the end vanishing, he becomes an invincible, abstract figure, since he had neither past memories to weaken him nor future concerns to restrict his conduct." [33] *The Rambling Guitarist* outlines this notion precisely in the way it handles the elusive question of Taki's past. When Yuki enquires about Taki's former lover, who we are told has passed away, Taki replies mysteriously: "You shouldn't hang around someone like me. I come from a different world than you." Here, we get a sense of how the artificial, borderless world in which Taki operates has started to seep into his very persona; that he has perhaps almost become a bodily manifestation of his shadowy former deeds.

The Taki of the present, freed from the chains of his past, achieves a kind of invincibility (both emotionally and physically) that allows him to navigate this borderless world unfettered by either social or practical constraints. Indeed, it is telling that despite how frequently Taki gets into fights in the film, it is only as we reach the final showdown, an hour into proceedings, that we see him bleed. This superhuman quality is even referenced in an earlier scene where Taki is embroiled in a punch-up with one of the fishery workers. The worker, believing Taki is responsible for the fishery owner's death, proclaims angrily: "Are you even human?" When Yuki runs over and intervenes, she asks Taki: "Why were you letting him hit you?" implying that here, any physical weakness displayed by Taki was purely self-imposed, and that he could have easily fought off the fishery worker if he had wanted to.

Here again, we return to the idea of male power fantasies and ideas around the self-regulatory masculinity of jingi. With Standish and Ikegami drawing a link between contemporary jingi and that of the samurai, it is rather apt that the film that Buichi Saito is perhaps best remembered for in the West is 1972's *Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart in Peril*, the fourth in a six-part *chanbara* (swordplay) series featuring a disgraced samurai wandering the country as a for-hire ronin. With this in mind, we can interpret *The Rambling Guitarist's* Taki in much the same light: a modern-day samurai treading a morally grey area between good and bad, using fists and pistols instead of a sword, a theme that would be continued to its logical extent in Kinji Fukasaku's immensely popular yakuza series of the early '70s, *Battles Without Honour and Humanity* (Jingi Naki Tatakai).[34]

This continuing trend of the same traditional character archetypes within multi-installment, populist cinema is worth examining in detail. In *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale talks of two parallels of film discourse, on one hand actively hostile to populist cinema and its "values of entertainment and fantasy rather than realism, art or serious aesthetic stylisation." [35] On the other hand, a new strain of discourse looking to popular culture to debate and reassess its value. With the identification of the latter, Neale offers a corrective to this dichotomy of high versus low.

[31] Hunt, Leon (2011) *The Good, the Bad, and the Culturally Inauthentic: The Strange Case of the "Asian Western"*. *Asian Cinema*, 22(1), pp.99-109

[32] Treglia, Laura (2018) *Mondo-ing Urban Girl Tribes: The Boom of 1960s-70s Erotic Cinema and the Policing of Young Female Subjects in Japanese sukeban Films*. *Film Studies*, 18(1), pp.52-69

[33] Barrett, Gregory (1989), p.193.

[34] Varese, Federico (2006) *The secret history of Japanese cinema: The Yakuza movies*. *Global Crime*, 7(1), pp.105-124

[35] Neale, Steve (2000), p.8.

*The Rambling Guitarist*, a film that wears its populist, genre status openly on its sleeve, reveals the inadequacies of discourses hostile to this form of cinema. As a piece of mass-market entertainment operating within the fantastical world of the mukokuseki genre, to what extent does it craft its own individual merit as a piece of cinematic art beyond the formulaic archetypes in which it exists? If we are to subscribe to Neale's two parallels of film discourse, it is the latter in which we seek to situate *The Rambling Guitarist*, albeit with some difficulty, given its status as the first in a series of many films; does one discuss *The Rambling Guitarist* in isolation, or as only one part of the wider wataridori film series (or merely one of many similar Nikkatsu films)?

Mark Schilling's *No Borders No Limits* references how landmark critical studies of Japanese cinema such as Donald Richie and Joseph Anderson's *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* makes little or no reference to Nikkatsu Action or the wataridori series,[36] in many ways confirming Neale's ideas about film discourse, that as a purely populist piece, it was somehow less worthy of analysis or depth. Even within Schilling's book, while other Nikkatsu directors like Toshio Masuda and Seijun Suzuki are given their own chapters, Buichi Saito is not. This seemingly validates the sense of his directorial input as un-auteur-like and he is instead relegated to the status of a kind of workmanlike figure (where the stamp of authorial intent is anonymised and subsumed), merely a product and part of the system itself as opposed to a recognisable talent with individual agency - where that same authorial intent is attributable to a singular point of creative genesis.

In his essay included in the booklet accompanying Arrow Video's release of *The Rambling Guitarist*, Tom Mes discusses this exact issue: "The very breadth and diversity of Buichi Saito's output make him an unlikely candidate for auteurist rediscovery, but his rich filmography and the number of titles still fondly remembered by Japanese audiences demonstrate how skewed and limited our officially sanctioned version of Japanese film history is - and how much pure joy is left to discover." [37] Here, the essence of a genre director like Saito is equated with the breadth of his output (i.e., quantity versus quality), but also the notion of whether that same work, by definition, might offer a pure joy that goes beyond the more refined viewing experience of officially sanctioned Japanese cinema classics. Is a mechanised, formulaic means of evoking cinematic joy any less valid than a method dubbed more auteuristically superior (and thus more individualistic) by critics? It is perhaps this systemisation of the pleasure-creation process that Mulvey hints at when she states how "the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work," [38] with received archetypes of gender central to this narrative of recycling a purer kind of packaged joy, albeit one that panders to audience desires and fascinations as opposed to critical acclaim.

## CONCLUSION

Much like the plastic, fast-food accessibility of its characters, much of the depth that can be found in *The Rambling Guitarist* can only be seen in context with the component genre codes and gendered archetypes that the film dresses itself in. In regards to masculinity, the film eclipses its muscular face-value Nikkatsu Action trappings to offer a deeper statement on the traditional values of both giri-ninjo and jingi. Likewise, the film holds up two parallel ideals of femininity; one modern and business-minded, the other outwardly Westernised, but held back by a deep-rooted Japanese traditionalism.

In both its male and female characters, *The Rambling Guitarist* examines a kind of slippery middle ground, not quite one thing, but equally, not quite the other. Just like its borderless mukokuseki setting, the film's men and women are caught between two divides; elusive, transitory, evolving. And at its heart, Akira Kobayashi's Shinji Taki, the most elusive of all, the character that stands as the very personification of the film's borderless nature; bodily Japanese, but aesthetically Western. A system of filmmaking that succeeds precisely because it bases every part of itself on a series of contrasts.

[36] Schilling, Mark (2007), p.9.

[37] Mes, Tom (2016), p.37.

[38] Mulvey, Laura (1989) 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' in *Visual and other pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.14-26.

What the wataridori series, Nikkatsu Action, and its star-system of Diamond Guys all signify is the very point of the populist genre model of filmmaking, a distinct awareness of tropes and archetypes; and by extension, how to play both with and against them to maximum effect to keep audiences coming back for nine installments in a single series. While the framework of these films may have been formulaic, this in many ways only served to heighten their core appeal; the attitude they gave off. A reinvented cinema for a reinvented nation.

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