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The Violent Lights of Capitalism: The Artificiality of Japan in Giants and Toys

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Abstract

Japanese New Wave, similar to new wave movements that appeared after the second world war, was a collision of both a cultural and artistic movement. Japan's new wave movement represented a new youth that rejected old traditions and struggled with state power. Among the hundreds of films identified as part of this filmic era, Giants and Toys was, and still remains to be, one of the flag bearers for Japanese New Wave. This paper provides a close analysis of the showdown scene between the two main characters Goda and Nishi and engages in discussion about how this relates to the film and Japan as a whole. A stark look at the rapidly growing centrality of capitalism in postwar Japan, this particular scene in Giants and Toys confronts viewers' with several notes in its mise-en-scéne, cinematography, choreography, and dialogue that explicitly illustrate director Yasuzo Masumuro's own belief about the state of Japan. This paper reveals through this analysis that it is Masumuro's belief that it is impossible for Japan to possess autonomous subjectivity, doomed by its act of masking its traditions with Western, and specifically American, ways.

Keywords

Japanese New Wave, Giants and Toys, Yasuzo Masumura, capitalism, Japanese cinema, Japanese consciousness, postwar Japan, mise-en-scène

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The Violent Lights of Capitalism: The Artificiality of Japan in *Giants and Toys*

Similar to many films in the Japanese New Wave genre, Yasuzo Masumura’s *Giants and Toys* (1958) tests cinema’s boundaries and offers its viewers challenging and shocking experiences to reveal the culture that developed in Japan and ultimately accepted after World War Two. The film follows Nishi (Hiroshi Kawaguchi), a naïve young man working in the marketing department of the World Candy Company, and his boss, Goda (Hideo Takamatsu), as they participate in various schemes to make World the most popular candy company in Japan. In an attempt to best his competitors, Goda strategically uses Kyoko, a traditionally unfeminine woman with rotten teeth, to construct a celebrity that is linked to World’s promotional campaign. A working-class girl, Kyoko is thrust into the limelight and gains fame instantly. Goda’s extreme dedication to the company is tested, and Nishi comes to a dreadful understanding of Japan’s work-obsessed culture, which mirrors that of American culture. In one particular scene, Goda and Nishi have a showdown after hours in the office. Nishi refuses to ask Kyoko to wear a spacesuit for the marketing campaign because he feels the job is killing him morally and physically, while Goda is unamused with Nishi’s disobedience. This scene is critical to the film because it demonstrates Masumura’s belief that it is impossible for Japan to have any kind of autonomous subjectivity; instead, it is doomed to the artificial masking of its traditions with American ways.

The scene begins with a medium shot of Goda looking directly at the camera. The camera pulls back seconds after to make room for Nishi’s entry into the frame, where he confronts Goda. Much like breaking the fourth wall in a play, Goda’s stare into the camera, and thus at the viewers, suggests that he is addressing those watching, as if telling them to pay attention to what is to come. His glance looks knowing and expectant a suggestion that is proven when Nishi walks in, and Goda, unperturbed, responds immediately. The two engage in dialogue that is so fast paced and
fires so quickly it is, at first, difficult to follow. Though an argument takes time to form, Nishi’s and Goda’s responses seem prepared, as though they are reiterating an already written script. Paired with the theatrical act of looking at the viewers, the argument itself is much like an act. They seem to be going through the motions of a discussion they have already had. What is this argument? Masumura makes this quite explicit: Goda speaks of a mass collective Japan to which Nishi must conform in order to succeed, while Nishi wants to be out of this system. Correct to claim, then, is the sense that their argument is all an act, as the debate between the individual and mass society is an old one that underpins Japanese New Wave films and Japanese consciousness in the postwar era.

The debate within the world of the film is representative of larger sociological debate in Japan which also finds its way into the scene’s choreography. Behind Goda, on the other side of the window, is a large globe lined with red lights arranged into words. The illuminated text moves around the globe in the same pattern throughout the scene, visually echoing the way the dispute between Goda and Nishi moves in circles. As soon as Nishi enters the frame, Goda walks toward him, continually pushing him back. As a result, the pair walk around desks multiple times. The repetitive nature of this walking, the movement of light around the globe, and the routine-like speech between the two characters reinforce the circularity of the quarrel that was present in postwar Japan.

The argument, however, also demonstrates the power imbalance between the two: as much as Goda is unsurprised when Nishi enters the scene, his physical advances control Nishi’s movements by pushing him backwards. The discussion happens, ends the same way, begins again, and ends the same way again. At the debate’s eventual conclusion, Nishi heaves for air as he speaks, reflecting his hesitation in his quest for individualism, while Goda continues to be
assertive, moving Nishi in the direction he pleases physically in the scene. Although he begins by merely dominating Nishi physically, he ultimately does so mentally, as well. The scene ends with Nishi fleeing the room, seemingly defeated. After all, in the final scene of *Giants and Toys* Nishi puts on the space suit Goda wanted Kyoko to wear and does the work he abhorred. Individualism loses in the face of collectivism, which Goda represents. Through the mise-en-scene and Nishi’s defeat, Masumura negates the idea that autonomous subjectivity exists. Instead, Japan is depicted as utterly consumed by artificiality – the climactic showdown itself is shown as a scripted act that renders the debate meaningless and fake, a cyclical debate that never results in change.

Goda’s and, by extension, postwar Japan’s rejection of autonomy is demonstrated again when, during their confrontation, Goda and Nishi stand in front of the stock market chart. Nishi screams that he wanted to be like Goda before then jumps away from the chart. For a moment, he claims the frame for himself and states that Goda is “not even human,” but Goda immediately re-enters the frame and bullies Nishi into submission once again. The capitulation is supplemented by the camera taking on the role of Nishi, moving from an eye level shot to slightly below eye level at the same time as Goda reasserts his ideological dominance over Nishi. The individualism that Nishi claimed in thought, in shot and, in separation of himself from the capitalist values embodied by the stock chart, is short-lived. He is overcome by Goda's beliefs: capitalism and tradition, two deeply entrenched ideologies that are difficult to overcome.

The saturation of this counterfeit culture is also highlighted by the pseudo-presence of Kyoko in the confrontation scene. Featuring a yellow space suit with bold red checkers, Kyoko’s campaign posters are littered around the office space. The colours of the posters themselves mimic that of the garish red light illuminating the characters, making them unavoidable and and the focus of attention in the scene. The multiplicity of these posters refers to endless reproduction of
artificiality. Kyoko is a make-believe character manufactured for pop culture, whose image blurs the line between an image and what is real, deepening every time her picture is reproduced. The bizarre unification of this dichotomy is illustrated in the scene when Goda points to a cardboard cutout of Kyoko and says “make her wear the space suit,” implying that the image of Kyoko is Kyoko. Here, the individual who is portrayed as an individual is not actually an individual. Instead, Kyoko is an object belonging to the corporation; she is simply a reproduction of a person World can use for capital. Goda points to Kyoko but is referring to the original human. Japan that is not individual and autonomous, but is instead an image of another place. The reproduction of the posters featuring Kyoko that signify a confusion between the real and fake are reminiscent of a brightly coloured Japan that is also a reproduced image of America in many ways. Like Kyoko, who has been reduced to a cardboard version of herself, with the real and replica blurred, Japan seems to be a cardboard cutout version of itself, too. Postwar Japan is no longer Japan—it is simply a version caught between itself and the West.

Much as Kyoko becomes inseparable from her cardboard cutout, art itself is commodified in the film, and it is in the final part of the scene that Masumura makes his boldest statement. As the camera pulls back to reveal the clutter of the office, we see Kyoko’s face on the left wall, gazing down at the paintings and artist supplies scattered around. Even art, an activity that is ostensibly an extension of the artist’s subjectivity, is watched over by a pop-culture celebrity—a corporate entity. The battle between art and commerce is an overarching theme in Japanese New Wave films, yet Masumura goes a step further. Through lighting, mise-en-scene, dialogue, and movement, he posits that everything in Japan, even the individual, is subsumed by capitalism. It is the obverse, however, that Masumura ignores: is a culture untinged by any other possible?
Works Cited