
A brief history of independent cinema in Japan and the role of the Art Theatre Guild

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The notion of „independent cinema“ varies considerably depending on the context. Whereas in the United States the term „independent“ in relation with cinema primarily relates to the films made outside the dominant film studios of Hollywood, in Europe it has quite different connotations. On the one hand, the term „independent“ refers to films funded publicly by communities, the state or the European Union. The subsidies system, so the argument goes, guarantees the filmmakers the freedom to realize their visions of cinema „independently“ from commercial considerations and without catering to the tastes of the movie-going majority. The subsidies system is seen as a guarantee for the continuity of national film traditions that without financial support could not compete with the blockbusters made in Hollywood and elsewhere. On the other hand, in countries like in Germany the term „independent“ sometimes refers to low-budget productions that fall through the grid of the subsidies system and that are made without public funding. In Austria the term is also used for productions made without participation of the public broadcast system that dominates domestic film production. In China or other authoritarian nations, the term primarily means “independent from state control or interference from the authorities”. This article will examine the meanings of „independent cinema“ in relation to Japan. I will point out how the meaning has changed over time and that it is necessary to keep the historical context in mind when speaking of “independent Japanese cinema”. In accordance with the topic of the conference the focus will be on the 1960s and 1970s and especially on the Art Theatre Guild.

Now, what exactly does “independent” mean in the context of Japanese cinema? State control or interference from the authorities does not seem to be a big issue in Japan. Neither is there a public subsidies system such as in most European countries. There are film studios in Japan that still seem to

dominate the film market, but a closer look reveals that this is true only at the level of distribution, not at the level of production. Today the three big studios Tōhō, Shōchiku and Tōei turn out only a handful of in-house productions. More than 90 % of all films are produced independently from the studios. Even on the level of distribution, where the studios still play a dominant role, more than 75 % of the films are distributed by “independent” distributors. These films usually have a far more limited release than the films distributed by the studios, which also run their own theatres. Most of these films are low-budget productions with little prospect of making a lot of money at the box-office or even to recoup the production costs. Although the term “independent” still connotes an opposition to the big studios, the fact that they have virtually dismissed their film production and that the majority of films are distributed by distributors other than the studios, makes the term “independent” very ambiguous. The heterogeneity of form, style and content makes it also difficult to understand “independent” as a synonym for “Arthouse” films, for commercial “mainstream” films fall into this category as well. As it seems, the denomination “independent film” has today all but lost its meaning.

The advent of independent productions

In the 1920s, when the first so-called independent productions or *dokuritsu puro* appeared, the situation was quite different. Since the formation of Nikkatsu, the first big film studio in Japan, in 1912, a studio system had developed that dominated the rapidly growing film production, but that left many directors and actors dissatisfied. The establishment of their own production companies was a deliberate reaction against the studio system, which distinguished them from the other small production companies that existed before or alongside the film studios. The motivations behind the establishment

of *dokuritsu puro* were manifold. Some became “independent” for artistic reasons, as in the case of Kinugasa Teinosuke, who founded his own production company in 1926 in order to realize the ambitious *Kurutta ippeiji* (“A Page of Madness”), an early masterpiece of avant-garde cinema. Another example is Makino Shōzō, who was disillusioned with the conservatism of Nikkatsu, in 1921 left the studio and established his own production company Makino kyōiku eiga seisakusho, later renamed Makino Kinema (1923) and finally Makino Production (1926) which played an important role for the development of Japanese cinema. From Makino Production there emerged a number of important directors such as his sons Makino Masahiro and Matsuda Sadatsugu and actors, who reinvented the *jidaigeki* genre.

In most cases, however, it was economic considerations that caused actors and directors to establish their own companies. Along with the studio system a star system emerged; the leading actors and actresses started to compete with the *benshi*, the obligatory film narrators, for the favour of the audience. Very soon the stars began to demand their share in the profits. Kataoka Chiezō, Bandō Tsumasaburo, Arashi Kanjūrō and Tsukigata Ryūnosuke, the leading stars of the popular *jidaigeki*, founded their own production companies which marked the beginning of the so-called star-productions. A similar development can be observed in the 1960s when popular stars like Mifune Toshirō or Katsu Shintarō established their own production companies. Thus, the stars were able to make more money. Also, they were no longer dependent on a single employer, but had more choices. This brought them higher salaries as well as a greater freedom. In the end, however, the stars remained dependent on the studios and the big cinemas, just as the studios and cinemas depended on the popularity of the stars. Many important directors such as Itami Mansaku, Inagaki Hiroshi or Yamanaka Sadao emerged from these star productions that flourished in the late 1920s and early 1930s. From the mid-1930s onwards, with increasing centralization and tightening of state control many of these independent production companies were swallowed up or supplanted by the big studios, who gained power and dominated the film market. In 1941, the war government ordered all movie companies to merge into the three blocks Shōchiku, Tōhō and the newly established Daiei. Thus the first phase of independent productions came to an end.

An overview of independent film production before the war would not be complete without mentioning the Proletarian Film Liga or Purokino. Founded in 1927, the Communist Purokino movement was short-lived – it was banned in 1934. Other than the star productions and the director’s productions which operated within the confines of a commercial cinema, the Purokino movement pursued primarily a political goal. Although they never accomplished making feature films, the Purokino played an important role in advocating an alternative mode of film exhibition. A premise of the movement was that the cinema must go to the people and not the other way round. They rejected movie theatres and took their documentaries and animation films to factories and assembly halls as part of their political activism. The anti-capitalist Purokino movement strived not only for independence in production but also independence in distribution and exhibition. This alternative way of production, distribution and exhibition – *jishu eiga* and *jishu jōei* in Japanese – became an important model for independent productions after the war.

Independent film after the war

In the late 1940s, a second wave of independent production companies emerged, this time mostly for political reasons. After the war, the studios had to conform to the new demands of the allied occupation forces headed by the United States. They also had to deal with labour unions that were established under the influence of the allies and exerted enormous pressure. Tōhō was shaken by three major strikes which brought the studio to the edge of ruin. The third strike, which lasted for 195 days, was ended in August 1949 by the intervention of the Japanese police and the U.S. army. Later on, during the so-called Red Purge, Tōhō and the other studios took their revenge by firing left-wing filmmakers and personnel. The outbreak of the Cold War led to a change in occupation policies and to the suppression of the communist-dominated labour unions. In 1950, members and sympathizers of the Communist Party were removed first from official positions and later from the private sector by order of General MacArthur. More than 300 people in the film industry lost their jobs in this way. As a result many left-wing directors established their own production companies. Yamamoto Satsuo, Imai Tadashi and Kamei Fumio founded Shinsei Eigasha, Kamei later created his own Kinuta Puro, Yoshimura Kōzaburō, Shindō Kaneto and Yamada

founded Kindai Eigasha, and there were a number of other leftist production companies such as Yagi Puro, Shinseiki Eigasha, Gendai Puro and Mingei Puro. With the backing of labour unions as well as the Communist Party they made films about the proletariat and the citizen's struggle against the bureaucracy and the state. The films criticized the establishment and exposed the contradictions within Japanese post-war society. Most of these independently produced films were distributed by Hokusei Eiga, the distributor of movies from the Soviet Union. The films were also shown in film circles organized by the labour unions as well as in smaller and medium-sized cinemas that supported the independent filmmakers. Some of the films were financed by labour unions: Kamei Fumio's *Onna hitori daichi o yuku* ("Woman Walking on Earth Alone", 1953) by the Japan Coal Miners Union of Hokkaidō, Imai Tadashi's *Yamabiko gakkō* ("The Yamabiko School", 1952) by the Yamagata Teacher's Union, or Sekigawa Hideo's *Hiroshima* (1953) by the Japan Teacher's Union Nikkyōso.

Around the time these films were released the studios had completed their restructuring and had recovered from the loss of talented staff in the course of the Red Purge. In 1953 Tōei introduced the double bill (*nihontate*) system and the other studios quickly followed Tōei's example. Because of the block-booking system the studios now had to provide their cinemas with two new films every week. If they could not keep up on their own, they resorted to independently produced films to fill out their programme. The independent filmmakers profited from this arrangement insofar as it allowed them to reach a wider audience. The loser was the independent distributor Hokusei Eiga, who went bankrupt in 1953. Although most independent films after the war were made by leftist filmmakers, there are several noteworthy independent productions that were not politically motivated. Shimizu Hiroshi, Goshō Heinosuke or actor-turned-director Saburi Shin also made a number of independent albeit not ostensibly political films. Their films were mostly distributed by the studios Shintōhō, Shōchiku and Daiei.

In the 1920s and early 1930s the independent production companies had profited from the relative weakness of the capital-weak studios, after the war they also had capitalized on the weakness of the studios hit by labour unrest and restrictions from the occupation forces like the ban of sword-fight scenes in *jidaigeki*. They successfully occu-

pled certain gaps in the market, but were often dependent on the studios either as sub-contractors or because they had to fill out their repertoire. However, in the late 1950s, when the studios regained their power and the studio system flourished, the studios left almost no room for independent productions. In 1959, when the studio system reached its peak, there were no independent productions at all. Thus the second wave of independent productions ended.

The third wave

The 1950s are generally regarded as the Golden Age of Japanese cinema. They were certainly the Golden Age of the Japanese studios. After the painful adjustments of the post-war period, Tōhō, Shintōhō, Shōchiku, Daiei, Nikkatsu and the newly established Tōei dominated not only film production but, as they were distributors and exhibitors at the same time, all other levels of the movie market.

Together with radio the movies were a favourite pastime. Many people went every week to see the new double feature. At the end of the 1950s Japanese cinema reached its zenith. In 1958, 1.13 billion people went to the movies, and in 1960 production reached an all-time high with 548 new films. In order to satisfy the ever-increasing demand for new material, several young assistant directors were given a chance to direct their first films at a (for the time) rather early age. Nikkatsu and Shōchiku in particular had several talented assistant directors who debuted in this way. Nikkatsu had resumed film production in 1953 after being active only as distributor for American films during the occupation years. The studio poached young assistant directors from the other studios, notably from Shōchiku (e.g. Suzuki Seijun, Imamura Shōhei, Nakahira Kō, Kurahara Koreyoshi), whose subsequent films infused the Japanese cinema with new vitality. Shōchiku itself, having specialized in melodrama for a predominantly female audience, tried to counter the sudden decrease in audiences (particularly the decline of female movie-goers) by giving its young assistant directors a chance to try out new and innovative ways. In 1959 Ōshima Nagisa debuted with *Ai to kibō no machi* ("A Town of Love and Hope"), in 1960 Shinoda Masahiro followed with *Koi no katamichi kippu* ("One Way Ticket for Love"), Yoshida Yoshishige (later Kijū) with *Roku de nashi* ("Good-for-Nothing"), Tamura Tsutomu with *Akunin shigan* ("Desire to be a Bad Man") and Takahashi Osamu with *Kanojo dake ga shitte iru*

(“Only she knows”) in 1960. Their films set a new course and the press was quick in labelling them “Shōchiku Nouvelle Vague” after the French Nouvelle Vague, whose films were introduced to Japan at the same time. The difference between the two was that the Japanese Nouvelle Vague was essentially a product of the studios (Imamura Shōhei, who, at least in the West, is also associated with the Japanese Nouvelle Vague, worked for Nikkatsu), whereas the French Nouvelle Vague like many other innovative movements in Europe established itself outside the studio system.

Ōshima, Yoshida and Shinoda soon encountered difficulties where the studio was concerned, because they were not allowed the freedom they needed to develop their ideas. As early as 1960, Ōshima left Shōchiku, when the studio pulled back his fourth feature *Nihon no yoru to kiri* (“Night and Fog in Japan”) after only four days in the cinemas. Yoshida left the studio in 1964 after his film *Nihon dasshutsu* (“Escape from Japan”) had been severely cut by Shōchiku (before that, one of his projects had been cancelled and he had had to go back to work as assistant director for a while). In 1965, Shinoda finally left Shōchiku after making a dozen of films there. For the directors of the Shōchiku Nouvelle Vague and others who later followed their example, escaping from the assembly line production system of the studios was an important step in order to unfold their individuality and to gain independence. They founded their own production companies Sōzōsha (Ōshima), Gendai Eigasha (Yoshida) and Hyōgensha (Shinoda) and continued making films independently. Despite the friction between the directors and the studio (they did not always settle amicably, especially in the case of Ōshima), the break was not complete. Even after they had parted company, many of their films were still distributed by Shōchiku. Only after finding a new distributor and later a new producer in the Art Theatre Guild could the Nouvelle Vague directors completely disengage themselves from Shōchiku. What becomes obvious here is the fact that holds true even today that independent productions continue to a certain extent (especially with regard to distribution) to depend on the big studios. This dependency was not necessarily one-sided, however, because the studios had reduced their production in order to cut costs and depended on independent productions to meet their block-book- ing contracts.

In some respects this is also true for the Art

Theatre Guild, which in the mid-1960s became the artistic home of the directors of the Japanese Nouvelle Vague. Ultimately, even the Art Theatre Guild was dependent on Tōhō, its main financier and one of its initiators. ATG did not compete with Tōhō and the other studios, they rather complemented each other. Experiments made possible by ATG were unthinkable within the structure of the studio system, especially in times of dwindling attendance and decreasing revenue. The studios preferred to let others worry about the unprofitable auteur films and concentrate instead on the rather more lucrative genre cinema. To a certain extent, however, the studios supported independent productions such as ATG’s because their experiments were considered an important source of innovation. From 1968 onwards, ATG became the major experimental laboratory of Japanese film. Soon they began to act as talent scouts as well, so the studios had new talents to fall back on whenever they needed them.

Until the 1950s there had been no real conflict between artistic claim and commercial value (almost all of Ozu’s films, for instance, were box office hits), but during the 1960s commercial considerations became increasingly important. This was partly the result of a change in the audience, which became more and more varied and eventually split up into little groups of people with specified interests and predilections that could not be satisfied by one single film.

In the 1960s, television replaced the cinema as the favourite form of entertainment. Because of this and the rapidly developing leisure industry cinema attendance declined drastically. This had its effect not only on the studios but mainly on exhibitors, who were bound to the studios by exclusive contracts. Smaller theatres in particular were no longer able or even willing in view of decreasing profits to pay for expensive studio productions. They started looking for cheaper alternatives and found them in low-budget films of independent companies, which mushroomed in the early 1960s. As these films provided a topic which was still taboo in the studios, i.e. sex, they quickly found their audience and brought handsome profits to the cinema owners as well as the small independent production companies at the expense of the studios. The number of these so-called “eroductions” increased from 15 in 1962 to 98 in 1965 and 207 in 1966. In 1968, the 265 “eroductions” for the first time outstripped the film production of the studios.

By the late 1960s, these independently pro-

duced “eroductions” became known as *pink eiga*, a term still used today. Like studio productions they were made primarily for commercial reasons, but they were less restricted as far as content and plot were concerned. Therefore, many directors used them as far as the low budgets permitted to make very individual and innovative movies. Wakamatsu Kōji, Adachi Masao and other radicals used their *pink eiga* for political agitation, others such as Yamatoya Atsushi used them for formal experiments. The manager of the Art Theatre Shinjuku Bunka, Kuzui Kinshirō, who organized special screenings at his cinema, is to be thanked for the fact that the films of these directors were made available to an audience outside of the confined *pink eiga* circuit, which at last led to their recognition by film critics.

In the 1970s, the big studios started to encroach upon the lucrative sexploitation market as well. Nikkatsu changed its entire production to so-called Roman Porno (softcore sex films) in 1971, Tōei started its so-called “Pinky Violence” series and even the family-oriented Shōchiku studio started making sex films through its daughter company Tōkatsu. This did not mean, however, that the independently produced *pink eiga* lost their importance. On the contrary, as most studios (except Nikkatsu) had stopped employing new assistant directors in order to reduce costs, aspiring filmmakers found their chances for a career severely limited. They had to look for alternatives and found them in directing *pink eiga* as they provided a way of getting into the movie business. Takita Yōjirō, Suō Masayuki, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and other successful directors of the 1980s and 1990s started out like this. Even directors who are not usually associated with *pink eiga*, like for instance Oguri Kōhei, Hara Kazuo or Suwa Nobuhiro, worked at the beginning of their careers as assistant directors in this genre that is so essential to Japanese film.

Many of these directors had made 8mm films as early as high school or university. Student and amateur films became an important aspect of the cinematic landscape of the 1970s. These activities did not start in the 1970s, but go back to the late 1950s. The film club of Nihon University in particular played a decisive role in this. Jōnouchi Motoharu, Adachi Masao and Hirano Katsumi later became important representatives of Japanese experimental film. If the term “independent” fits any aspect of movie industry of the 1960s at all it has to be experimental films. Here ATG played a

doubly decisive role. On the one hand, apart from Teshigahara Hiroshi’s Sōgetsu Art Center, ATG’s Shinjuku Bunka Cinema and its underground theater Sasori-za had become the most important venue where experimental film was concerned. On the other hand, ATG gave several experimental directors the chance to make feature films, among them Matsumoto Toshio, the stars of the amateur 8mm scene Ōbayashi Nobuhiko and Takabayashi Yōichi, as well as Terayama Shūji, famous poet and playwright and leading figure of the Japanese avant-garde theatre. ATG enabled them to direct groundbreaking films, that became masterpieces of Japanese avant-garde cinema.

Matsumoto had originally directed documentaries, the third important pillar (beside *pink eiga* and experimental and student films) of Japanese independent cinema in the 1960s. The film department of the publishing house Iwanami (established in 1950) played a decisive role, especially with regard to PR films and documentaries. Hani Susumu, Kuroki Kazuo, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, Ogawa Shinsuke and Higashi Yōichi as well as many others started out with Iwanami Eiga. Ogawa and Tsuchimoto continued to make documentaries and became internationally distinguished directors in their field. Others later moved on to feature films.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Art Theatre Guild held all the strings as far as Japanese independent cinema was concerned. ATG united the directors of the Nouvelle Vague who had left the studios, the documentarists of Iwanami Eiga, directors of “eroductions” as well as representatives of the amateur and experimental film scene. But what exactly was the Art Theatre Guild? In order to answer this question it is necessary to return once more to the Golden Era of Japanese cinema.

The Art Theatre Guild

Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashōmon* winning the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival in 1951 gave the Japanese movie industry a first glimpse of the international market. The subsequent success of other Japanese films at European festivals impressively demonstrated the strength of the Japanese film industry. Still, film exports could in no way compare to film imports. Foreign movies had always been popular in Japan, but after WW2 their number was limited because of currency regulations, and importers were allocated quotas by the government. As domestic film production in the 1950s increased at the expense of foreign imports, distributors were

less willing to take risks. They preferred films that could guarantee commercial success and largely ignored ambitious and “difficult” films.

There were several initiatives that attempted to adjust this imbalance. One was instigated by the group Cinema 57 which had been founded in 1957 by the young directors Teshigahara Hiroshi, Hani Susumu, Matsuyama Zenzō and Kawazu Yoshirō, the critics Ogi Masahiro and Kusakabe Kyūshirō, Maruo Sadamu (later director of the National Film Center), the editor of the journal *Geijutsu Shinchō* Sakisaka Ryūichirō and Mushanokōji Kanzaburō. Their first project was the film *Tōkyō 58*, which was shown at the first festival of experimental film in Brussels in 1958. Another project was the formation of the Association of the Japanese Art Theatre Movement (*Nihon āto shiatā undō no kai*) which aimed at setting up special cinemas for the showing of non-commercial art movies. This association was joined by the critic Togawa Naoki, the director Horikawa Hiromichi and Kawakita Kashiko, the vice-president of Tōwa who became a driving force of the Japanese Art Theatre Movement.

Before the war, Kawakita Kashiko, together with her husband Kawakita Nagamasa, had imported many important European films to Japan. After the war the Kawakitas were still committed to the ambitious European art cinema. In the mid-1950s Kashiko spent two years in Europe, getting acquainted with the art theatre movement, which became international in 1955, as the International Association of European Art Theatres C.I.C.A.E. (*Confédération Internationale des Cinémas d'Art et d'Essai*) was founded. On returning to Japan she worked towards the establishment of a film library, of an institution similar to the Cinémathèque Française and the British Film Institute and a movie art theatre like the National Film Theatre in London, which had opened in 1957 with Akira Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-jō* (“Throne of Blood”, 1955).

Kawakita Kashiko and the Japanese Art Theatre Movement were supported by Mori Iwao, then vice-president of Tōhō and a close associate of the Kawakitas. Mori had started out as a film journalist and had written the first comprehensive study of the American movie business in Japanese. Then he started to write screenplays, became a producer and, in the 1920s, initiated the “Association for the Recommendation of Good Films” (*Yoi eiga o susumeru kai*). Mori talked Iseki Taneo, the president of Sanwa Kōgyō, into supporting them and on

November 15, 1961 the Art Theatre Guild of Japan (*Nihon āto shiatā girudo* / ATG) was launched. Iseki Taneo became its first president. In the 1920s, he had edited the programmes of the Musashinokan, one of Tōkyō's most prestigious first-run cinemas. Later he had worked for Shōchiku and P.C.L. (a predecessor of Tōhō), and in 1946 he had gone into business for himself. He founded the cinema chain Sanwa Kōgyō and became an exhibitor. Sanwa Kōgyō brought one million yen and a cinema, the Shinjuku Bunka, into the new undertaking. Tōhō contributed five million yen and five cinemas (the Nichigeki Bunka in Tōkyō, the Meihō Bunka in Nagoya, the Kitano Cinema in Ōsaka, the Tōhō Meigaza in Fukuoka, and the Kōraku Bunka in Sapporo). The cinema operators Etō Rakutenchi, Teatoru Kōgyō and OS Kōgyō joined in with one million yen respectively and four cinemas (the Sōtetsu Bunka in Yokohama, the Kōrakuen Art Theatre in Tōkyō, the Kyōto Asahi Kaikan in Kyōto and the Sky Cinema in Kōbe). Thus, the Art Theatre Guild had ten cinemas in the whole of Japan at their disposal.

In April 1962, ATG started their program with *Matka Joanna od aniołów* (“Mother Joan of the Angels”, 1961) by Polish director Jerzy Kawalerowicz. The repertoire was chosen by a programming committee consisting of mainly film critics. At the time of its founding these were Iijima Tadashi, Iida Shinbi, Izawa Jun, Uekusa Jin'ichi, Shimizu Chiyota, Togawa Naoki, Nanbu Keinosuke and Futaba Jūzaburō. Most of them had published in the programs of the Musashinokan and knew Iseki Taneo from that time. Further members of the committee were Ogi Masahiro, Hani Susumu, Matsuyama Zenzō, Sakisaka Ryūichirō, Kusakabe Kyūshirō, Maruo Sadamu and Kawakita Kashiko from the Association of the Japanese Art Theatre Movement. Teshigahara Hiroshi was not included as he had already started work on *Otohsiana* (“The Pitfall”, 1962), which was later distributed by ATG.

Setting up an independent committee was a radically new approach. As most of its members were film critics the films were chosen with artistic instead of commercial considerations in mind. At first, the films distributed by ATG were predominantly European productions, mostly contemporary, but also some classics that had never been shown in Japan such as the films of Sergei Eisenstein and Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). Apart from masterpieces by Bergman, Cocteau, Antonioni, Buñuel,

Fellini, Resnais and other established directors, ATG introduced several less famous names such as young Polish directors (Kawalerowicz, Wajda, Munk), the French Nouvelle Vague (Godard, Truffaut, also Agnès Varda and Bertrand Blier), Soviet filmmakers (Kalatozov, Shvejtser, Kheifits, Parajanov), young rebels like John Cassavetes and Tony Richardson, and, not to be forgotten, Satyajit Ray and Glauber Rocha. ATG thus played a vital role in the creation of a new consciousness of film history in Japan.

Apart from foreign movies, ATG also acted as distributor for several independently produced Japanese films such as Teshigahara's *Otoshiana* as well as films by Shindō Kaneto, Hani Susumu, Kuroki Kazuo, Yoshida Yoshishige, Ōshima Nagisa and Jissōji Akio, whose subsequent films ATG also produced.

Not only the method of selecting the films was new, the way in which they were presented was novel, too. One of ATG's basic rules was to show each film for at least a month, irrespective of attendance. In the 1960s, the repertoire was usually changed weekly, and a four-week run was exceptional even for box-office hits. ATG's flagship was the Art Theatre Shinjuku Bunka in Tōkyō, which was managed by Kuzui Kinshirō who remained pivotal until the mid-1970s. The Shinjuku Bunka had been built in 1937 as the contract cinema of Tōhō. Kuzui readapted it according to his own plans and created a completely new type of cinema. The whole cinema was painted dark grey, bills and posters and any other kind of flashy advertising were banished, there were only afternoon shows (most cinemas opened in the morning), the seats were spacious and comfortable, there was enough space between the rows so nobody had to get up to let someone pass, and the audience could not

simply come and go during a performance like they did in the other cinemas, but were asked to wait until the next screening started. The foyer acted as a gallery where well-known painters and illustrators exhibited their work. ATG posters were often designed by famous artists and were utterly different from traditional movie bills (see the interview with Kuzui).

In the evenings, after the movies were over, Kuzui, who was also interested in modern theatre, started to organize theatrical performances. He benefited from the fact that several new troupes had split off from established ensembles in the early 1960s and were now looking for suitable venues. The first stage performance in the Shinjuku Bunka was the Japanese premiere of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* on June 1, 1963, followed by more plays by Albee, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, LeRoi Jones, Tankred Dorst, Jean Genet, Edward Bond, Barbara Garson, and other contemporary foreign dramatists. Many of these were Japanese debuts. Apart from these, the Shinjuku Bunka also put on plays by leading Japanese writers such as Terayama Shūji, Kara Jūrō, Betsuyaku Minoru, Shimizu Kunio and Mishima Yukio. Thus the Shinjuku Bunka was not only one of the most important cinemas in Japan but also (despite the tiny stage) one of the major venues for contemporary drama.

Kuzui envisaged an expansion of the Shinjuku Bunka into a comprehensive art theatre. Together with ATG productions and in special programs he presented experimental short films, among them works by Iimura Takahiko, Tomita Katsuhiko, Donald Richie, Ōbayashi Nobuhiko (whose films were shown publicly for the first time), Itami Jūzō (who was responsible for the design of the ATG logo) and Adachi Masao's *Sain* (1963), which was

shown as the first “Night Road Show” in 1965. The Shinjuku Bunka was the first cinema in Japan that had regular shows later than 9 pm, a practice that was later adopted by many small theatres.

In order to present even 8mm and 16mm films in the best possible quality (the screen of the Shinjuku Bunka was too big for these formats), Kuzui had a small theatre built in the basement of the Shinjuku Bunka for film and theatrical performances, concerts, and other events. The Sasori-za was inaugurated on June 10, 1967 with a performance by the flamenco dancer Komatsubara Yōko. The first film that was shown there in August 1967 was Adachi Masao’s *Gingakei* (“Galaxy”, 1967). It was Mishima Yukio who was responsible for the name Sasori-za (Theatre Scorpio), a tribute to Kenneth Anger’s film *Scorpio Rising* that had been shown at the Shinjuku Bunka before. The Sasori-za was the first underground theatre in Japan, others soon followed. It was a center of experimental drama and experimental film (beside Teshigahara’s Sōgetsu Art Center) as well as a popular meeting place for all kinds of artists. There were movie and theater performances, concerts and recitals, happenings, and dance performances by Hijikata Tatsumi, the founder of butoh dance. The Sasori-za was one of the major centers of the Japanese avant-garde and set an example for many other underground theatres.

Five days after the opening of the Sasori-za ATG released Imamura Shōhei’s controversial documentary *Ningen jōhatsu* (“A Man Vanishes”, 1967). This was the first film that ATG also co-produced. The idea of not only distributing but actually producing films had taken shape in 1965 with Mishima Yukio’s *Yūkoku* (“The Rites of Love and Death”), the only film he directed, which was screened with great success at the Shinjuku Bunka. As the film is merely 28 minutes long, it was shown as a double feature together with Buñuel’s *Le Journal d’une femme de chambre* (“Diary of a Chambermaid”, 1966). A little later, Ōshima’s *Yunbogi no nikki* (“Yunbogi’s Diary”, 1965) was similarly successful. These triumphs provided the encouragement for ATG to start producing films.

Calculating the profits of their previous films, ATG decided that with a budget of approximately 10 million yen (then less than US\$ 28.000) they should be able to cover the production costs. What eventually facilitated the decision to expand into production was the liberalization of the import market. In 1964, the official limit for importing for-

eign movies was abolished. So was the allocation of quotas that had determined the number of films per distributor. One result of this liberalization was a rise in distribution costs so that it became increasingly uneconomical to import foreign films. ATG decided that it would be more profitable to produce its own movies.

In the case of Imamura’s *Ningen jōhatsu* ATG had not been involved in the planning stage but had only helped out in the final phase of production. The first film planned and produced by ATG was Ōshima Nagisa’s *Kōshikei* (“Death by Hanging”), which was released in February 1968. Production costs were split between ATG and Ōshima’s production company Sōzōsha. Later productions followed the same pattern. The films were financed by ATG and the director’s company in equal shares. Compared to those of the studios, feature film budgets were quite modest. Even though the estimated 10 million yen were hardly ever enough, ATG’s films were referred to as “10 million yen movies” (*issenman’en eiga*).

Projects were again chosen by an independent planning committee of film critics. In the beginning, the directors of the Japanese Nouvelle Vague were at the center of ATG’s production activities. Many of their major works were made in collaboration with ATG: *Kōshikei*, *Shōnen* (“Boy”, 1969), *Tōkyō sensō sengo hiwa* (“The Man Who Left His Will On Film”, 1969), *Gishiki* (“The Ceremony”, 1971), and *Natsu no imōto* (“Little Summer Sister”, 1973) by Ōshima Nagisa; *Rengoku Eroika* (“Heroic Purgatory”, 1970) and *Kaigenrei* (“Coup d’Etat”, 1973) by Yoshida Kijū; *Shinjū ten no Amijima* (“Double Suicide”, 1969) and *Himiko* (1974) by Shinoda Masahiro, as well as *Hatsukoi jigokuhēn* (“The Inferno of First Love”, 1968) by Hani Susumu. Furthermore, ATG distributed Ōshima’s *Ninja bugeichō* (“Manual of Ninja Martial Arts”, 1967) and *Shinjuku dorobō nikki* (“Diary of a Shinjuku Thief”, 1968) and Yoshida’s *Saraba natsu no hikari* (“Farewell to the Summer Light”, 1968), *Erosu + Gyakusatsu* (“Eros Plus Massacre”, 1970) and *Kokuhakuteki joyūron* (“Confessions among Actresses”, 1971). ATG’s importance for the Japanese Nouvelle Vague can hardly be overestimated.

At the same time, ATG gave several experimental directors the chance to realize their extremely individual fantasies, most importantly Matsumoto Toshio and Terayama Shūji whose first feature films *Bara no sōretsu* (“Funeral Procession of Roses”,

1969) and *Shūra* (“The Pandemonium”, 1971) respectively *Sho o suteyo, machi e deyō* (“Throw Away the Books, Let’s Go into the Streets”, 1971) and *Den’en ni shisu* (“Pastoral: To Die in the Country”, 1974) were made possible by ATG. Terayama’s last film, *Saraba hakobune* (“Farewell to the Ark”, 1984) was again co-produced by ATG. Jissōji Akio and Kuroki Kazuo also were experimental in their approach; in the 1970s they became ATG’s leading directors. Jissōji had started out in television and had only directed one short film, *Yoiyami semareba* (“When Twilight Draws Near”, 1969), which ATG had distributed and shown as a double feature together with Ōshima’s *Shinjuku dorobō nikki. Mujō* (“This Transient Life”, 1970) was the first of four films that Jissōji realized with ATG. The story of the incestuous relationship of two siblings became the biggest hit of ATG and won international recognition by winning the Grand Prix at the Locarno Film Festival in 1970. Together with Mishima’s *Yūkoku*, the film was the most controversially discussed film at the FIPRESCI conference on “Eroticism and Violence in Cinema” held in Milan in October 1970. However, like so many other films of this period the film soon fell in oblivion and is still waiting to be rediscovered as one of the masterpieces of Japanese cinema. This can also be said about Kuroki Kazuo’s films of this period. ATG distributed his early masterpiece *Tobenai chinmoku* (“Silence Has No Wings”) in 1966 and produced his following feature films *Nihon no akuryō* (“Evil Spirits of Japan”, 1970), *Ryōma ansatsu* (“The Assassination of Ryōma”, 1974), *Matsuri no junbi* (Preparations for the Festival; 1975) and *Genshiryoku sensō* (“Lost Love”, 1978).

Other directors, many of whom worked for a studio, got the chance to finally realize their dream projects which they could not do within the structure of the studios: Okamoto Kihachi made *Nikudan* (“Human Bullet”, 1968) and *Tokkan* (“Battle Cry”, 1975), Nakahira Kō *Hensōkyoku* (“La Variation”, 1976), Kumai Kei *Chi no mure* (“Apart from Life”, 1970), Masumura Yasuzō *Ongaku* (“Music”, 1972) and *Sonezaki shinjū* (“Double Suicide at Sonezaki”, 1978), Nakajima Sadao *Teppōdama no bigaku* (“Aesthetics of a Bullet”, 1973), and Nakagawa Nobuo his swansong *Kaidan Ikiteiru Koheiji* (“The Living Koheiji”; 1982). ATG also produced several of Shindō Kaneto’s films, the veteran of Japanese independent film, among them *Sanka* (“Okoto ad Sasuke”, 1972) and *Kokoro* (“Love Betrayed”, 1973).

The early films of ATG were determined by the explosive political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The highlight of their political films is Wakamatsu Kōji’s *Tenshi no kōkotsu* (“Ecstasy of the Angels, 1971”), which, in 1971, was closer to the events of the day than any other film. *Tenshi no kōkotsu* is based on a screenplay by Adachi Masao, who two years later defected to Lebanon and became a member of the Japanese Red Army. The film anticipated the terrorism of the left-wing guerrilla in an almost prophetic manner and thus made for one of the biggest scandals in the history of ATG (see the interview with Wakamatsu).

After 1972, political topics faded into the background. It is possible to identify two strands of escapism in ATG’s films: an escape from urban to more rural settings and an escape into the past. Symptomatic for this development are Saitō Kōichi’s *Tsugaru jongara-bushi* (“Tsugaru Folk Song”, 1973) and Ichikawa Kon’s *Matatabi* (“The Wanderers”, 1973), both released in 1973. Both films were directed by studio directors, which indicates a development towards increasingly orthodox films. ATG, admittedly, continued to co-operate with experimental directors such as Takabayashi Yōichi and, later, Ōbayashi Nobuhiko, but the films made after 1973 were much less radical than the films earlier. The main reason, apart from the general spirit of the age, was the closing of the Shinjuku Bunka in 1975. ATG thus lost one of its most important assets.

Most of ATG’s other cinemas had already bailed out earlier. The profits were simply not big enough, neither were the people in charge sufficiently farsighted. The last film to be shown at the Shinjuku Bunka before it was closed was Terayama Shūji’s *Den’en ni shisu*. When in 1978 the Kitano Cinema in Ōsaka also closed down the Nichigeki Bunka in Yūrakuchō was the last of the originally ten cinemas directly run by ATG. With the closing of the Shinjuku Bunka ended the heyday of the Art Theatre Guild. Kuzui Kinshirō, who embodied the essence of ATG like nobody else, even though he had remained an employee of Sanwa Kōgyō and had never officially been a member of ATG, stayed on for some time as an independent producer, but his function as main producer was taken over by Taga Shōsuke, who had been responsible for editing the programs ever since the beginning of ATG. Tōhō took over the Shinjuku Bunka and reopened the newly refurbished cinema with Just Jaeckin’s *Emmanuelle*.

Sexploitation films kept many afloat in Japan as well, as it was the only market in the 1970s that actually boomed. Still, many directors tried to break out of this quandary and ATG gave a number of Roman Porno and *pink eiga* directors such as Sone Chūsei, Yamaguchi Seiichirō, Kumashiro Tatsumi, Ōhara Kōyū, Negishi Kichitarō, Ikeda Toshiharu, Takahashi Banmei and Izutsu Kazuyuki the chance to establish themselves outside this field.

Among the directors who had left Nikkatsu was also Hasegawa Kazuhiko, who had debuted with ATG to great acclaim in 1976 with *Seishun no satsujinsha* (“Young Murderer”). This film marked the beginning of a new development in the history of ATG: the promotion of young directors who had not yet gained a lot of experience in the making of feature films.

The Sasaki years of ATG

In 1979 Iseki Taneo retired as president of ATG and was succeeded by Sasaki Shirō. As a student at Waseda University Sasaki had been a member of the Waseda theatre group Gekidan Kodama. Together with Betsuyaku Minoru and others he founded the theatre group Shingekidan Jiyū Butai, the predecessor of the Waseda Shōgekijo troupe. After graduation he briefly joined TBS as assistant director and in 1971 founded the company Tōkyō Video Center that rented facilities for radio and television programmes. Sasaki’s first contact with ATG was when ATG distributed Hashiura Hōjin’s *Hoshizora no marionetto* (“Puppets under Starry Skies”, 1978), which Sasaki had produced with his company. It was the first feature film of Hashiura, who knew Sasaki from their common Gekidan Kodama days. The change from the 79 year old Iseki to the 38 year old Sasaki was not only a generation change at the top of ATG, it also denoted a change in ATG’s orientation towards a stronger support of young film talents.

In the 1970s the decline of the Japanese studio system continued and with the exception of Nikkatsu, whose Roman Porno production flourished, the studios ceased hiring new assistant directors and thus were not able any more to spawn new talents. In its undertaking to fill this void ATG under Sasaki became a major promoter of promising young filmmakers. ATG had launched new talents in the past as well, most notably Hasegawa Kazuhiko, whose debut film *Seishun no satsujinsha* had caused a sensation in 1976 and was voted Best Film of the Year by the renowned *Kinema Junpō*

critic’s poll. What so far had rather been the exception became the rule of ATG under Sasaki.

There was no lack of young talents. Several promising filmmakers had emerged from the self financed and self produced 8mm and 16mm *jishu eiga* circles. In 1978 Ōmori Kazuki, the star of the independent film scene of the Kansai region, won the Kido Award with his screenplay of *Orenjirōdo ekispuresu* (“Orange Road Express”), the most prestigious screenplay Award in Japan. Shōchiku bought the rights of the screenplay and produced the film that marked Ōmori’s feature film debut. In the same year Nikkatsu hired Ishii Sōgō for a remake of his 8mm film *Kōkō daipanikku* (“Panic in High School”) that was also Ishii’s feature film debut. In 1979 the *Pia* magazine, which had started in 1972 as a monthly entertainment information magazine, launched an Off-Theatre Film Festival that followed smaller exhibitions of *jishu eiga* in 1977 and 1978. Eventually this developed into the *Pia* Film Festival that until today is one of the most important showcases for young filmmakers.

An often neglected role in sustaining this new generation of independent filmmakers was played by several *meigaza* or small arthouse cinemas that actively supported these filmmakers by producing their low-budget 16mm films. Ōmori Kazuki’s *Natsuko to nagai owakare* (“Long Goodbye”, 1978), Yamakawa Naoto’s *Anaza saido* (“Another Side”, 1980), Inudō Isshin’s *Aka-suika ki-suika* (“Red Melon, Yellow Melon”, 1982) and Imaseki Akiyoshi’s *Furūtsu basuketto* (“Fruit Basket”, 1982) were produced by the Bungeiza, Tsuchikata Tetsujin’s *Sensō no inutachi* (“The Dogs of War”, 1980) by the Namikiza and Ōya Ryūji’s *Kami no ochite kita hi* (“The day God fell down”, 1979) and Ishii Sōgō’s *Kuruizaki sandārōdo* (“Crazy Thunder Road”, 1980) by the Kamiita Tōei Cinema. Of these Ishii’s *Kuruizaki sandārōdo* was bought by Tōei and released nationwide as 35mm blow-up.

Even though Ishii and Ōmori had made their feature film debuts with the major studios, the studios were not interested in developing their talents further. Here Sasaki stepped in and deployed their talents for ATG. The first film of the new Sasaki regime, that was no longer governed by a planning committee as in the past, was Hashiura Hōjin’s second feature film *Kaichōon* (“Before Spring”, 1980), followed by Ōmori Kazuki’s *Hipokuratesutachi* (“The Disciples of Hippocrates”, 1980). With Nagasaki Shunichi’s *Kugatsu no jōdan kurabubando* (“The Lonely Heart Club Band in Septem-

ber”, 1982) and Ishii Sōgō’s *Gyakufunsha kazoku* (“Crazy Family”, 1984) Sasaki subsequently also produced films of two other important representatives of the independent *jishu eiga* scene.

The second pillar of Sasaki’s new ATG line were directors with a background in *pink eiga* and Roman Porno. He produced Kumashiro Tatsumi’s *Misutā, misesu, misu ronrii* (“Mr., Mrs., Miss Lonely”, 1980), Izutsu Kazuyuki’s *Gaki teikoku* (“Empire of Punks”, 1981), Negishi Kichitarō’s *Enrai* (“The Far Thunder”, 1981), Takahashi Banmei’s *Tattoo ari* (“Tattoo”, 1982) and Ikeda Toshiharu’s powerful *Ningyo densetsu* (“The revenge of the Mermaid”, 1984). The last film was co-produced by the Director’s Company, an independent production company founded in 1982 by Hasegawa Kazuhiko, Sōmai Shinji, Negishi Kichitarō, Ikeda Toshiharu, Ishii Sōgō, Ōmori Kazuki, Takahashi Banmei, Izutsu Kazuyuki and Kurosawa Kiyoshi, which also produced Ishii’s *Gyakufunsha kazoku* and Sōmai Shinji’s *Taifū kurabu* (“Typhoon Club”, 1985). The latter won the Grand Prix of the Young Cinema Competition of the 1st Tōkyō International Film Festival and was distributed by ATG.

The Director’s Company was one of several new independent production companies established in the 1980s. Another was NCP (New Century Producers), started in 1981 by a group of producers who had left Nikkatsu. Together with ATG they produced Negishi’s *Enrai* and Morita Yoshimitsu’s acclaimed *Kazoku gēmu* (“Family Game”, 1983). *Kaichōon*, Hashiura’s second ATG feature *Mitsugetsu* (“Honeymoon”, 1982), Nagasaki’s *Kugatsu no jōdan kurabubando* and Ōmori’s *Kaze no uta o kike* (“Hear the Wind Sing”, 1981, after Murakami Haruki’s novel) were all produced together with Cinema Haute, the film-producing section of Sasaki’s Tōkyō Video Center that he had established as independent company when he was appointed president of ATG. The increase of independent production companies and the emergence of a number of new small movie theatres, so-called Mini-Theatres, and independent distribution companies drastically reshaped Japanese cinema in the 1980s. Investments of other businesses into film production during the time of the so-called bubble economy in the late 1980s contributed to these developments.

In November 1986 Sasaki stepped down as president of ATG after disagreements with the executives of Tōhō, the studio that stood behind ATG. Sasaki was followed by Kusano Shigeo,

but with Sasaki’s departure the activities of ATG practically came to a halt. Three more films were distributed by the Guild until 1992, among them scriptwriter Nakajima Takehiro’s debut as director, *Kyōshū* (“Remembrances” 1988). Nakajima’s screenplay had won a screenplay award sponsored by ATG, but the film was not produced by ATG any more, but only distributed. Kumashiro Tatsumi’s *Beddotaimu aizu* (“Bedtime Eyes”, 1987), Kaneko Shūsuke’s *1999-nen no natsuyasumi* (“Summer Vacation 1999”, 1988) and Yamakawa Naoto’s *SO WHAT* (1988), which had been planned by Sasaki as ATG productions, were realized with other production companies, too. Although ATG was never officially disbanded, after 1992 there are no signs of further activities. Sasaki continued a very successful career as independent producer. In 1989 he joined ranks with five other producers and launched the short-lived but important ARGO-Project and in 1993 founded the production company Office Shiros.

One could say that when Sasaki left ATG the Art Theatre Guild had fulfilled its task. Until the 1980s it had been one of very few refuges for independent cinema. In the 1980s other independent companies took over the tasks of the Art Theatre Guild and continued along the path set by ATG. With the retreat of the studios from film production the notion of “independency” had changed considerably in the three decades that the Art Theatre Guild was active in film production. What remains is an impressive legacy of 75 films produced and another 105 films distributed by the Art Theatre Guild and a secure place in Japanese film history for its accomplishment as innovator, motor and backbone of Japanese independent cinema.