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**The Insect Woman – Contextualising Imamura (and the
Intricacies of Global Cinema Study)**

Bachelor's thesis in film studies

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1. Abstract

This essay represents an attempt to further the understanding of the films by Japanese New Wave director Shohei Imamura through the use of post-colonial theory, and political and cultural contextualisation; it also offers discussion on the inherent issues of discussing non-Western cinema from a Western point-of-view, and how post-colonial theory can be used tentatively by Western writers to prevent the perpetuation of orientalism and the generalisation of non-Western cultures as a single entity simply titled 'the Other'. This is done through an in-depth exploration of Western film theory's problematic relationship to Asian cinema, along with disposition and historical contextualisation relevant to Imamura's films and the Japanese New Wave movement of the 1960s. This is then followed by an analysis on Imamura's sixth film, *The Insect Woman*, released in 1963, in which I implement post-colonial theory while also comparing it to Yasujiro Ozu's 1951 motion picture *Early Summer*, a film which addresses similar themes but in widely different ways.

2. Introduction

In June and October of 1960, two films, both written and directed by now-acclaimed Japanese director Nagisa Ōshima, were released in Japan, and would go on to be regarded as pivotal films in the ongoing development of the Japanese cinema. These films were titled *Cruel Story of Youth* and *Night and Fog in Japan* respectively, and their inception would herald the coming of a new style of Japanese film, one that would eventually draw comparisons to a similar contemporary phenomenon occurring in France: namely, The French New Wave. Thus, this new style of cinema would subsequently in Japan come to be known as the ‘nuberu bagu’, or, as we in the West know it, The Japanese New Wave.

While this conspicuous similarity in name might imply a tight familiarity or equivalency, the two movements shared anything but, any comparisons drawn between the two often being superficial in nature and mostly based on the experimental form employed by filmmakers within both movements,¹ as well as a shared emphasis on socio-politically charged narratives, often focusing on young, maverick protagonists (something that was similarly largely dropped in later films of both movements). Furthermore, while both movements, for example, drew influence from the Polish cinema of the 50s,² the domestic filmic traditions themselves which the two new waves claimed heritage from respectively were starkly different to one another in a multitude of ways, as were the unique sets of circumstances that acted as catalysts for both movements.

In particular, a majority of the directors belonging to the Japanese New Wave looked to the social, cultural and political developments in Japan following the Second World War for inspiration. As such, these directors – which, among others, included names such as Nagisa Ōshima, Masahiro Shinoda and Yoshige Yoshida, all of whom were in their 30s at the time – sought to make films that portrayed and distilled the everyday conflicts and cultural barriers that had become commonplace following the American Occupation in 1945 along with the nation’s sudden transition from an imperialist-militarist to a democratic one. The rapid societal changes, as well as the inevitable cultural gap that arose between older and younger generations, became central themes for many of the films that constituted the New Wave, especially during its early years, examples including Masahiro Shinoda’s *Youth in Fury*

¹ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 4

² Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 6

(1961), Shohei Imamura's *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), and Oshima's own *The Sun's Burial* (1960).

One of the most notable names to arise from this set of directors is that of Shohei Imamura, who first achieved critical acclaim in his homeland with his fourth film, *Nianchan* (*My Second Brother*, 1959, aka *The Diary of Sueko*). Like his contemporaries, Imamura's early films were made within the commercial confines of the studio system, (indeed, many, if not most, of the New Wave directors worked within studio systems, at least during the earlier parts of their careers) several of which were youth films, a genre of films which had at the time become something of a defining characteristic for the studio which Imamura worked for, that being Nikkatsu Studios (commonly regarded as one the most commercially inclined Japanese studios of its time)³. However, starting with his fifth film, *Buta no Gunkan*, or *Pigs and Battleships*, Imamura went on to direct a number of films centring on the lives and livelihoods of Japanese lower-class women, effectively distancing his works from the generally far more male-centric narratives of his peers.

Out of the seven films Imamura directed during the span of the New Wave, four of them – these being *Pigs and Battleships*, *The Insect Woman* (1963), *Intentions of Murder* (aka *Unholy Desire*, 1964) and *The History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (1970) – all feature women in leading roles, and focus specifically on the personal lives and perceived gender roles of women in Japanese post-war society, whereas the remainder of his 60s output, which includes *The Pornographers – An Introduction to Anthropology* (1966), *A Man Vanishes* (1967) and *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968), still treat societal aspects such as female sexuality, female independence, and mother roles, as central themes.

The second of these, and Imamura's sixth film overall, here in the West titled *The Insect Woman* (originally titled *Nippon Konchûki*, or *Entomological Chronicles of Japan*), is the first of his films to dedicate the entirety of its narrative to the exploration of a single female main character (*Pigs and Battleships* implemented both a male and a female protagonist). Thematically, the film deals primarily with the political and social changes that occurred in Japan from the Taisho era (1912 – 1926) all the way to the early sixties as reflected in the life of its main character, Tome, who repeatedly attempts to adapt and find a life of happiness in a country of constant and rapid transformation, all the while being torn between her own search for individuality and the desires of her extremely conservative family. It is this inner conflict

³ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 58

of what it means to be Japanese and a woman in a time of cultural turbulence, which forms the back-bone of the film – a theme which will, likewise, play a pivotal part in this essay.

3. Purpose, Issues and Demarcation

Perhaps the largest trepidation one faces when attempting to discuss and/or analyse artistic works created within cultural boundaries which are highly foreign to oneself is the immutable lack of proper social and political context required in order to fully comprehend the breadth of a particular work's significance within its contemporary cultural climate. For even if one takes the time to attempt to grasp the particularities and nuances within said specific culture, going so far even as to attain empirical knowledge first-hand through practice and study of a society's customs inside its borders, there remains the issue that one cannot truly claim to fully understand a foreign culture without having been born into, and subsequently actually grown up in, it. Which is not say, of course, that an outside perspective of foreign art cannot possess its own unique value, however, any observation made of such art without the added understanding of its cultural origin (even an educated one) remains limited, making any observation of that type a daunting task for the observer – assuming of course he or she possesses the modesty to understand this.

Shohei Imamura was a vocal advocate for this very line of reasoning, claiming that the reason he always wanted to 'ask questions about the Japanese' was due to him feeling that it was the people he was 'qualified to describe'; likewise, he would also express confusion toward the positive reception he started receiving in the West from the late 70s and onward, stating that 'I don't really think that people there can possibly understand what I'm talking about.'⁴

Admittedly, Imamura's films have never been particularly international, their general inaccessibility to anyone non-Japanese secured by Imamura's ubiquitous fascination with the seething underbelly of Japanese society and the taboo-laden subject matters intrinsically attached to it, while also draping their directorial excursions into questions of national identity and gender values in unorthodox narrative and aesthetic choices (themselves responses to the norms and conventions of contemporary Japanese cinema).

Imamura's apparent popularity among Western critics and cinephiles is a subject worthy of discussion in and of itself. But the topic which I would like to bring to the forefront in this essay is how Imamura's work, or, indeed, subversive native cinema in general, can best be

⁴ Imamura, S. interviewed by Kendall, N. 'All you need is sex' (2002); *The Guardian*

understood by someone not privy to the inner social and political workings of the culture from which said work has originated, without resorting to discourse based on the concept of the 'Other'. Discourse based on the 'Other' is, essentially, what happens when the analyst or observer within a certain context establishes, intentionally or otherwise, a two-sided dichotomy between the analyst's own perception of the norm – for example, his or her own native cinema – and everything else which does not correspond to that norm, which is generalised into a single entity titled the 'Other'. A ubiquitous feature within Eurocentric writing, it presents an easy trap for Western writers to fall into when attempting to provide discourse on non-Western art and/or media; it is a trap which this particular essay has already fallen into, due to usage of the phrase 'subversive native cinema in general'.

In his text *The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order*, film professor Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto brings these issues to the forefront, confronting and calling into question the conviction and epistemological certainty with which Western film scholars have appropriated Western theoretical discourses in their study of non-Western cinema. Why and how this is a problem is expressed much more acutely and in far greater detail by Yoshimoto in his text than I could hope to do within the limitations of this essay, however, for the sake of the coherency of this text I will do my best to summarise the most relevant points.

In short, Yoshimoto's text addresses and problematizes one of the most common underlying assumptions in Western film theory: Hollywood's ubiquitous status as the 'norm' against which all types of cinema different from it must be assessed. Now, this assumption offers little contention within the context of Western film, where Hollywood's defining and characteristic continuity style is commonly acknowledged as 'standard', meaning that all Western film which does not correspond to this type of narrative is inherently radical or 'avant-garde' since it is unavoidably rebelling against pre-established conventions. The problem with this mind-set, however, arises when this same line of reasoning is used when attempting to discuss film made outside of the perimeters of these conventions, e.g. film that is non-Western. The result of this is that all national film tradition which does not draw heritage from Hollywood is often mistakenly labelled as 'avant-garde', in spite of being merely alternative, not rebellious (not necessarily, anyway). To exemplify this, Yoshimoto brings up acclaimed director Yasujiro Ozu's sometimes-status as a 'modernist' director in the West, described as such in this case by Bordwell and Thompson due to Ozu's familiarity yet dissimilarity with classical Hollywood cinema. Perhaps needless to say, this statement

resulted in an academic dispute on just how much Ozu was, if at all, truly influenced by American cinema, acutely summarised here by Yoshimoto:

Paul Willemen criticizes Bordwell and Thompson by saying that to call Ozu a modernist is not so much different from European modernist artists' questionable appropriation of African tribal sculpture in the early twentieth century. Bordwell responds that Willemen's critique does not hold, since African sculptors never saw modernists' art work, but Ozu was thoroughly familiar with the Hollywood cinema. Lehman intervenes in this skirmish and takes side with Willemen. According to Lehman, Bordwell dismisses too easily the similarities between traditional Japanese art and Ozu's films, both of which, as Joseph Anderson points out, construct discontinuous, non-narrative space.⁵

Despite praising the astuteness of Lehman's critique, Yoshimoto nevertheless goes on to castigate Lehman as well as Willemen for their 'Eurocentric view of modernism, which does not consider what modernism possibly means for the non-West.' Finally, he states:

A seemingly innocent question of Ozu's modernity, in fact, cannot be answered unless we carefully take into account the specificities of Japanese cinema, social formations, and history. Such a problematic in Japanese or non-Western scholarship will finally lead to many more fundamental questions concerning the definitions of nation and of a cinema.⁶

It should go without saying that Western norms and theoretical frameworks form an intrinsic part of any Western writer's mind and will inevitably always permeate their perception of the world, try as they might to avoid it. The question I would like to pose is not how to eliminate Western reasoning in cross-cultural discourse, but rather how Western writers can avoid subordinating native cinema to Western cinema, and, in effect, re-contextualise theories to fit the specifics of a certain culture, rather than have said culture be appropriated to fit the theories themselves. That said however, the issue is far too broad to be tackled within a single essay; of course, the uniqueness of a single culture also means that it would be impossible to approach the issue on anything but a case-by-case basis. Hence why it is Japanese cinema which will be focused on in this essay, as opposed to, say, Eastern Asian; the reason for choosing a single film is partially due to the limited scope of this essay, but mostly due to there already existing numerous texts which delve into the subject much more in-depth on a more general level; by comparison, the intent behind this essay is to build on that earlier research and provide a specific example through a detailed analysis of said example through

⁵ Yoshimoto, M. 'The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Films Studies and the Postcolonial World Order' (1991); *Film Theory and Criticism Eighth Edition* (2016), pp. 873

⁶ Yoshimoto, M. 'The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Films Studies and the Postcolonial World Order' (1991); *Film Theory and Criticism Eighth Edition* (2016), pp. 874

the implementation of cultural and political context. The remainder of texts representing the aforementioned research will be detailed later on in the essay.

4. Further Context

But why then have I chosen *The Insect Woman* specifically? Well, for a number of reasons. Firstly, despite being one of the leading directors of the New Wave, the amount of research made on Imamura's films remain limited in comparison to the likes of several other notable Japanese directors, such as Kurosawa, Ozu and even Imamura's contemporary, Ōshima. This is likely in part due to the relatively culturally impregnable nature of his films to anyone not natively Japanese, in comparison to, say, the less culturally esoteric films of Kurosawa. Regardless of the reasons, the limited amount of analysis made on his work should be rectified; not only because of Imamura's experimental and innovative style, but also because of his willingness to shed light on parts of Japanese society commonly neglected in Japanese cinema.⁷ By building on previously established research on Imamura's work, while also narrowing my field of study down to a single film, I hope to divulge the subtler details of Imamura's craft, and observe how his stylistic and aesthetical approach serve to communicate the themes and ideologies present in his films.

Secondly, while its predecessor *Pigs and Battleships* may be commonly referred to as the work with which Imamura truly hit his stride⁸⁹, it is *The Insect Woman* that represents his largest step forward creatively in terms of his 60s output, as well as that which solidified his standing within the New Wave (even if Imamura himself may not have cared for such a distinction). Employing a less rigid, more episodic narrative structure, as well as a number of conspicuous and unorthodox visual implementations – including, but not excluded to, a common yet often unpredictable use of freeze frames, metaphorical allusions through editing, haikus presented to the viewer through semi-diegetic text, etc. – while also daring to go further than ever before in his exploration of the controversial and taboo-laden everyday parts of contemporary life, centring on themes of prostitution, incest, and rape, among others. While a substantial amount of these aspects had been present in earlier films by Imamura, it was with *The Insect Woman* where they all finally came together in a singular, cohesive fashion, honing and simultaneously introducing several stylistic and thematic devices that

⁷ Imamura, S. interviewed by Phillips, R. 'Japanese film director Shohei Imamura speaks to the World Socialist Web Site' (2000); *World Socialist Web Site*

⁸ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 59

⁹ Nakata, T. 'Shohei Imamura Interview' (1994); *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 114

would become mainstays of Imamura's following films. So while *The Insect Woman* may not be one of Imamura's most renowned films in the face of, say, *Vengeance is Mine* (1979) or *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983), it remains undoubtedly one of his most important in terms of his growth as a director and as an artist. As both an early characteristic example of Imamura's films, both technically and thematically, the film seems to me an ideal choice in studying Imamura during his formative years.

5. Earlier Research and Fields of Study

As I stated earlier in this essay, the primary goal behind this essay is to further the understanding of Shohei Imamura as a filmmaker through analysing the ways in which he portrays issues of gender, national and sexual identity in *The Insect Woman*, as well as in what ways Imamura's selected methods and techniques can be construed as challenging or subversive toward Japanese societal norm and values. Needless to say, knowledge of modern Japanese history and contemporary Japanese politics is necessary in order to apply cultural context, hence why I will be relying on texts detailing historical developments and the impact they have had on Japanese media – cinema in particular. However, due to the relatively individual nature of Imamura's films ('relative', that is, in comparison to other directors working within the Japanese studio system) as well as his rebellious propensities in regards to writing and directing, interviews with Imamura, as well as essays written by him, will also be included as a means to better understand how his personal views have impacted his narrative and stylistic choices. While this method of study, which focuses on the individual, does draw some similarities to work done through and regarding the 'auteur theory', actual auteur theory will have to be neglected for limitation's sake. Texts written on Imamura's films, the Japanese New Wave or Japanese cinema in general will also be addressed if they happen to be relevant to the subject at hand. Studies on the construction of national identity through cinema and its ideological implications will likewise inform this text, as will writings on Eurocentric analysis, though the latter will mostly fill a peripheral role for the sake of preventing this text from casting too wide a net.

6. Theoretical Framework

To summarise, the goal behind this text is to successfully identify the technical and stylistic means through which Imamura portrays the inner conflict of gender and nationality at the core of the post-war contemporary Japanese woman through a theoretical framework that

acknowledges cultural and political context in the understanding of native non-Western cinema while also eschewing Eurocentrism and neo-colonial discourse. In order to do so, we must first assess how to properly implement studies on indigenous history, politics and culture alongside a film scientific theory capable of accommodating those factors without being restricted to a specific native perspective, be that perspective western or otherwise. In his essay *The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order*, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto examines a number of studies done by Western film scholars with similar goals, and details their overall shortcomings in accomplishing said goals. The examples are numerous and the subject is handled by Yoshimoto with greater precision and acuteness than I could hope to do within this text's limited format; nonetheless, for the purposes of this essay I would like to highlight one of the key points made by Yoshimoto regarding the study of Japanese film, more specifically the relationship – or, rather, the divide – between historical studies and theoretical studies. Yoshimoto illustrates this by placing the historical studies on Japanese film done by Donald Ritchie in direct contrast to the entirely theoretical work on Japanese film by Noel Burch; whereas Ritchie draws from his empirically gained knowledge and first-hand experience with Japanese culture in his study of Japanese film and its unique native context, Burch chooses to decontextualize Japanese cinema entirely, studying select films on a case-by-case basis that emphasizes theory first-hand. Continuing on, Yoshimoto writes the following:

Thus, the real division in Japanese film scholarship is created not by the West/Japan dichotomy but by the opposition between theory and history. What is at stake is not simply the shortcomings of either theoretical work (Burch) or historical study (Ritchie) but the unproblematic division between history and theory itself. Generally speaking, both sides are quite respectful of each other and do not meddle in the affairs of the other group. Far from creating antagonism, the split within Japanese film studies has reached a curious equilibrium, a peaceful coexistence of theorists with area studies specialists. It is this mutually complicit relationship between theory and history that should be questioned and re-articulated. Put another way, we need to reexamine how the differentiation of empirical history from abstract theory creates an illusion that different critical approaches could democratically coexist side by side without any interference. What is at stake in the end is not a specific problem debated in the field of Japanese film studies but the question of how Japanese film studies is constructed as an academic discipline.

For instance, see David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 2–3. Desser argues that his purpose is to “situate the New Wave within a particular historical, political, and cultural context” without challenging the already existing other modes of critical discourse. Yet contextualization should not be mere supplement to theoretical abstraction or formalism. If it is merely supplemental, then, that mode of contextualization is

nothing more than vulgar historicism. When it takes the form of a radical questioning, contextualization becomes a critical practice of *mediation*, which demolishes the edifice of democratic pluralism.¹⁰

Fortunately, the use of post-colonial theoretical approaches, both as a means of critiquing and/or recontextualising Western film theory, as well as providing the framework in studies conducted on ‘world cinemas’, has gained greater prominence in later years. In his text *Deleuze and World Cinema* (2011), David Martin-Jones, for one, challenges the conclusions drawn by Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinema* books published during the 1980s, in which Deleuze theorizes on the split between the ‘time-image’ and the ‘movement-image’ in film, which Deleuze pinpointed as having occurred at the end of the Second World War. In his previous text, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* (2006), Jones attempted to expand on Deleuze’s ideas by introducing the concept of contemporary ‘hybrid-films’ (citing both Western and non-Western films as examples), which supposedly contain elements of both types of images. The problem with this approach, as Jones later admitted in his follow-up text five years later, is that it forces an appropriation of the films discussed in order to make them compatible with Deleuze’s theory – a direct result of Deleuze’s own lack of contextualisation for non-Western cinema, (in itself sparse in Deleuze’s books, with only a few select non-Western ‘auteurs’, for example Yasujiro Ozu, even brought up¹¹) as well as his lack of proper consideration for the historical impact of World War II outside of Europe and the USA. Which is not to say that Jones’s text is an attempt to dismiss Deleuze from the study of world cinema; just as Jones is quick to vouch for the importance of proper contextualisation when analysing foreign cinema, he is equally quick to point out the historical and cultural context which informed Deleuze as a philosopher and film scholar in 1980s Paris, which likewise should not be disregarded. Instead then of dismissing, Jones seeks to problematize and challenge Deleuze’s theories by bringing them into contact with cinema initially not taken into consideration by Deleuze due to the circumstances which ultimately informed Deleuze’s selection of films on which he grounded his research. Specifically, he describes his aim as ‘to discover the degree to which numerous films from around the world enable us to refine, adapt or reconsider the two categories by looking at films that exist somewhere between, or “instead off” them’,¹² as well as to ‘constructively critique his ideas in order to increase their applicability and relevance’¹³.

¹⁰ Yoshimoto, M. *The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Films Studies and the Postcolonial World Order* (1991); *Film Theory and Criticism Eighth Edition* (2016), pp. 880

¹¹ Martin-Jones, D. *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (2011), pp. 12

¹² Martin-Jones, D. *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (2011), pp. 13

¹³ Martin-Jones, D. *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (2011), pp. 10

The fact that Jones's writing, like so many others, persists in using (a) Western theory as a springboard for diving into non-Western (and Western) cinema, as well as art in general, might initially come off as a questionable attempt to undo the effects of Eurocentrism on the individual Western writer, yet ideas and theoretical frameworks cannot be made from thin air. The status of the Western writer as 'Western' forms a crucial part of said writer's perspective and cultural access, meaning that it needs to be acknowledged and made an integral aspect of any theoretic text produced (by a Western writer) on issues pertaining to non-Western matters – refusal or mere obliqueness to do so on the writer's part will inevitably result in a work of questionable merit built on hollow and presumptuous arguments. Jones realizes this, hence his admitting that his thoughts and line-of-reasoning are just as fallible to the traps of Eurocentrism as any other, inviting others to address such faults in his text should they find them.¹⁴ While being overly tentative may arguably be a fault in and of itself, self-reflexion, in this case, I would argue, remains nonetheless an indispensable component. As such, faults made in this matter by Western writers must also be allowed to a certain extent if debates on Eurocentrism are to move forward; matters of cultural identity and the impact it has on our world-views can easily blind us to our own prejudices, meaning that any text approaching the subject (including this one) needs to be read with an eye critical to its cultural implications.

Of course, tentativeness on the matter for its own sake remains of limited value; ruminations require that challenges be imposed upon them if they are to gain actual academic value. Jones's text, as he himself claims, does not exist merely to problematize Deleuze's theories but also to expand their worth to Western writers as tools seeking to deepen their understanding of non-Western cinema. In turn, by testing his own extensions on Deleuze's theories in a variety of cultural contexts, Jones argues, he does not only broaden the possibilities of Deleuzian writing, but also becomes able to make new discoveries within the study of all of the national cinemas addressed.¹⁵ Herein the possibility arises to test the boundaries of Western theory while still providing research on the form of non-Western films and how they are informed by the history, politics and values surrounding its inception.

While this mutually beneficial relationship may suffice as an adequate starting point, in and of itself it will not suffice for a thorough analysis simply because the study of global cinema is, by necessity, contextual. A theoretical approach which may work for one national cinema might not necessarily work for another; it might not even work for the same national cinema

¹⁴ Martin-Jones, D. *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (2011), pp. 16

¹⁵ Martin-Jones, D. *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (2011), pp. 15

but from a different point in time, just as it might not work for films made in the same country but in a different region. As such, there exists no preferred, all-encompassing method when studying global cinema; different circumstances require different tools, a necessity made even more difficult by the question of what even constitutes as national cinema. This particular question is a complicated one, and therefore not one which will be dwelt upon in this text; it does, however, warrant mention due to its intrinsic nature in relation to studies on global cinema. Essentially, the dilemma boils down to two pivotal discussions, these being the questioning of national cinema as a concept through the acknowledging of the possible existence of multiple ethnic groups within a single nation, whom may possess language, culture and religion separate from the other, possibly more dominant groups within that nation, as well as how national borders, and thus matters of national identity, are continually problematized and/or effaced by the effects of increasing globalisation. Does, for instance, films made and funded by Sami constitute as Swedish national cinema? What do we call films produced in more than one country, such as the Brazilian/French/Italian production *Orfeu Negro* (1959)? What of countries such as China or India, both at home to massive populations with a wide surplus of traditions, values and lingual differences of varying size and scale? Can there even be such a thing as a unanimous national cinema in a world where homogenisation of culture through international trade, communication and influence are becoming increasingly commonplace?

The difficulties presented due to globalisation specifically are particularly intricate, not only because of the complications it presents in our comprehension of the nation state, but also because of the powerful factor it becomes in each individual nation's cultural history and heritage. To exemplify, earlier attempts by film theorists to label Yasujiro Ozu as a 'modernist' because of the aesthetic and narrative differences between his films and those produced in Hollywood during his time may have been misguided, but to eliminate Hollywood entirely from the equation is not a viable solution either. As stated by Yoshimoto,

Nobody can question the dominance of the Hollywood cinema in the world film market. However, this does not automatically mean that the Hollywood cinema has been dominant trans-historically or trans-culturally. We need to put the Hollywood cinema in specific historical contexts; instead of talking about the Hollywood cinema as the norm, we must examine the specific and historically changing relations between the Hollywood cinema and other national cinemas.

The classical Hollywood cinema has certainly played a crucial role in the formation of any national cinema that had access to it, yet it can never have complete control over how a particular national cinema

is constructed. A national cinema as the culture industry exists in a complex web of economic, ideological, and social relations, and the classical Hollywood cinema constitutes only one element of those relations.¹⁶

Of course, much as the international distribution of cinema has affected globalisation throughout the last hundred or so years, the overall economic and political factors which have affected the production, marketing and direction of commercial cinema stretch significantly further back in time. In her essay *Theorizing Asian Cinema(s)*, in itself a continuation on her introduction to the anthology text *Contemporary Asian Cinema*, film scholar Anne Tereska Ciecko offers a general summary of contemporary East and Southeast Asia's relationship to the West, while also arguing for how Asian film can be approached from a post-colonial perspective.

For an in-depth understanding, I would suggest reading the essay(s), but for the sake of establishing a clear link between her writing and this text, I will highlight and subsequently discuss two pivotal points: namely, the politics of modern day self-orientalising in response to the 'Western gaze' as it is practiced by countries part of East or Southeast Asia (effectively the 'orientalist' perception of what 'Asia' is, which does not include, for example, Russia, nor the Middle East¹⁷, as argued by Ciecko) and how the international distribution of Asian film in the West can ultimately contribute to the strengthening and prolongation of orientalism, be that a conscious goal by the film's producers or merely the result of Western marketing and selective canonisation of Asian cinema.¹⁸

Now, that is a lot to unpack in and of itself, but for now, let us focus on the idea of the 'Western gaze' and how this has historically impacted the direction of Asian mainstream cinema in relation to the international market. Early in her introductory chapter, Ciecko writes that

The locations of contemporary Asia on the world map today still bear connections to centuries of cartographic, political, and cultural representations of land masses and seas, civilizations and human geographies. The term "Asia", although its exact etymological origins are in dispute, was used throughout history to define a place and people from the perspective of Europe, providing "a backdrop or coherent and culturally distinct 'other' against which a diverse and fragmented Europe could define itself." The Latin-derived term "Orient" referred in directional relation ("Near East" or "Far East") to the "Occident"

¹⁶ Yoshimoto, M. 'The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Films Studies and the Postcolonial World Order' (1991); *Film Theory and Criticism Eighth Edition* (2016), pp. 881

¹⁷ Ciecko, A. 'Introduction to Popular Asian Cinema'; *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (2006), pp. 4-5

¹⁸ Ciecko, A. 'Introduction to Popular Asian Cinema'; *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (2006), pp. 7-8

or the “West”. As argued by postcolonial critics – most notably Edward Said – “Orientalism” uses a Eurocentric logic to construct Asia in relation to the West, to assert imperialist power through representation.

Asia is extremely culturally diverse in terms of languages, religions, political systems, and cultural practices; therefore the suggestion of monolithic culture and homogeneity is extremely fraught. Nevertheless, “Asian” has been used – to different ends – to convey shared cultural attributes or experience, geographical origins, and/or race.

As an identificatory category in the United States, the federal government census bureau’s racial category of “Asian” refers to people with origins in the “Far East”, “Southeast Asia”, and the “Indian Subcontinent”. In the cultural politics of the United Kingdom and in Anglophone Africa, largely because of particular legacies of colonialism, the term “Asian” refers mainly to people from South Asia. (“Black British” has included people of Asian descent.) In the twentieth century and onward, English-language use of “Asian” has also served a politicized function in coalition-building of minority and marginalized peoples in dominantly white societies, and a celebration of multiple identities. Exclusionary hegemonic discourses also exist within Asian national and cultural contexts, marking and marginalizing those perceived as minorities and foreigners – including other “Asians”.¹⁹

While the overarching implications of the ‘Western gaze’ are nigh impossible to sum up in a truly neat and concise fashion, this part of Ciecko’s essay nevertheless manages to outline its most fundamental aspects, including how the lingering effects of colonialism continues to dilute the Western perception of ‘Asia’ (and, by extension, ‘Asians’) as a region, but more importantly in how that perception in turn affects Asian culture’s internalization of identity. Taken as a whole, it is an issue far too complicated for this text to tackle in its entirety; nonetheless, it is something which has had a profound effect on the development of Asian cinema as international export.

The 1950s was when Asian cinema first started to gain significant attention in the West, beginning with the surprise success of Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) and continuing through the exportation of several post-war Japanese films by directors such as Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi alongside Kurosawa, as well as Indian independent art films. While the West had certainly influenced Japanese cinema prior to the 50s (perhaps most strongly during the immediate post-war period, detailed in chapter eight) the commercial and critical international acclaim of Kurosawa’s period film (his first among many) resulted in a fundamental shift in mainstream Japanese film production, namely in that the audience had suddenly expanded from a strictly domestic one. Efforts were quickly made to capitalize on

¹⁹ Ciecko, A. ‘Introduction to Popular Asian Cinema’; *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (2006), pp. 4-5

the success of *Rashômon*, representative of a new mind-set by which films which were not expected to do well at the domestic box office could now instead aim for international cinemas and film festivals as a primary way to turn a profit. Interestingly, *Rashômon*'s popularity in the USA and Europe was met with confusion by Japanese film critics, most of whom had disregarded the film entirely upon release. Many assumed that the main reason for the film's success laid in its exotic appeal to Western audiences, resulting in that films with a specifically emphasized 'Japanese' style were chosen for distribution in the West, most notably samurai films, which included international hits such Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953), and Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961). It should also be noted that several of these films retained Japanese-sounding titles when distributed in the US, possibly as a means to further 'exoticise' them.

Of course, there exist several reasons to take into account when seeking to explain the sudden surge of interest in Asian cinema in the West during the 50s, auteur theory, and the flaunting of Ozu and Mizoguchi as 'auteurs' on par with the likes of Bergman and Fellini, being chief among them. Nonetheless, it remains an undisputable fact that Japanese films at the time which were canonized by Western cinephiles all presented a largely aestheticized, arguably even clichéd, portrayal of Japanese life and culture. While these were far from being the only types of films produced in Japan at that time, it is interesting to note that the films which did not match this orientalist view of Japanese society old and new, such as the youth films of the 1950s or the avant-garde cinema of the 1960s, were almost entirely ignored internationally up until the 1980s – despite several of these films now being considered classics within the Japanese canon.

It is particularly interesting then to bring Imamura into this context, not only because he himself is one of the now-acclaimed new wave directors to have his earliest films be ignored by contemporary Western film critics, but also because Imamura himself was also a staunch opponent of this clichéd representation of the Japanese people, electing instead to make films which he felt were truer representations of what it really meant to be Japanese during the post-war era (more on this in chapter eight).

Going back to Ciecko, she writes early on in her introductory chapter in regards to East Asia that 'the region cannot be viewed as a geographical given; it "has to be understood in terms of colonialism, postcolonialism, multinational capitalism, globalization, the complex and multifaceted interplay between the Asia Pacific and the Euro-American Pacific, and their

diverse and intersecting discursive productions.’²⁰ She ends her following essay by writing that postcolonial theoretical approaches

...provide vocabulary for critiquing cultural texts and contexts (e.g. the impact of colonialism and cultural imperialism, Orientalism, and racism). They can also assist in conceptualizing paradigms of cinematic spectatorship and representational politics – the gaze, power, and representation in ambivalent, doubled, and interdependent relationships. The study of international cinema and visual culture – including Asian cinemas – has benefited enormously from such interdisciplinary theories.²¹

The essays which make up the remainder of the anthology text offer no specific blueprint for how postcolonial theory ‘works’ in any given context; that said, they are all unified in their goal to discuss Asian cinema in a context that emphasizes political influence, international discourse, as well as the region’s problematic relationship to the West. Japan is, of course, a bit different in that it was never officially colonized by any Western power, and that it has economically and politically functioned as a first-world nation since the mid-1800s. That, however, does not change the fact that the nation, and its people, has been subjected to the same amount of stereotyping and prejudice from the West, nor that the country went through a massive forced political and cultural change during the American Occupation following World War II (a period which will be detailed in the seventh chapter). As such, I would argue, post-colonial theory will still provide for a suitable starting point given the intended goal of this essay.

7. Material and Methods

But how then do we tie this to Imamura, and *The Insect Woman*, specifically? Simple, for while Imamura may have claimed that no non-Japanese should be able to comprehend the subjects he addressed in his films, we should still be able to attain a deeper understanding of them by understanding what it was specifically which Imamura attempted to rebel against, and subsequently attempt to decipher how he did so. Imamura’s general dislike for the Japanese mainstream film industry, and the films of Yasujiro Ozu particularly, will be expanded upon in the following chapter, but for now, I suggest a comparative study of *The Insect Woman* and Yasujiro Ozu’s 1951 film *Early Summer*, observing the formalist similarities and dissimilarities between the two, as well as the differences in regards to theme, story structure and their main characters, Tome and Noriko respectively. Why *Early Summer*, then? Because not only was it the first film which Imamura himself worked on as assistant

²⁰ Ciecko, A. ‘Introduction to Popular Asian Cinema’; *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (2006), pp. 6

²¹ Ciecko, A. ‘Theorizing Asian Cinema’; *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (2006), pp. 31

director for Shochiku studios (thus being his earliest exposure to Ozu's way of working behind the camera, which Imamura took an immediate dislike towards (again, more on this later), but also because the films address similar themes – such as womanhood, family, and independence, all addressed in a post-war context – albeit in starkly different ways. Due to Imamura's intricate relationship to Ozu, both as a filmmaker and an individual, as well as Ozu's films being largely representative of the aesthetic view of Japanese people which Imamura actively rejected, I believe that a comparative study, taking post-colonialism into account, could result in a, admittedly limited, but nonetheless fruitful study. But before heading into the analysis, we will have to contextualise the films in question.

8. Disposition and Historical Context

To someone not properly acquainted with it, post-World War II Japanese politics and culture might be seen as something of a complex. The early post-war period – during which Japan was occupied by American forces – lasted between September 2, 1945 and April 28, 1952, and is undoubtedly one of the most important turning points in Japanese history, radically affecting politics, media and everyday life for decades to come.²² This was largely due to the Western influence brought in by the Americans, resulting in the democratization of a previously fascist, militarist nation,²³ an entirely reformed economic system,²⁴ and the upheaval of several traditional Japanese values, resulting in, for example, the increased rights of women²⁵ and a re-evaluation of the role of the individual²⁷. The implementations of these changes was spearheaded by the SCAP, (Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces) General Douglas MacArthur, who had been specifically tasked by the US government to ensure 'the abolition of militarism and ultra-nationalism in all their forms; the disarmament and demilitarization of Japan, with continuing control over Japan's capacity to make war; the strengthening of democratic tendencies and processes in government, economic, and social institutions; and the encouragement and support of liberal political tendencies'²⁸.

As a means of accomplishing this goal, popular media was immediately seen as an effective tool in promoting democratic ideals. The overseeing and censoring of Japanese media to

²² Metzler, M. 'The Occupation' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History* (2007) pp. 265

²³ Metzler, M. 'The Occupation' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History* (2007) pp. 267-270

²⁴ Metzler, M. 'The Occupation' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History* (2007) pp. 268-269

²⁵ Standish, I. *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema* (2000), pp. 6

²⁶ Metzler, M. 'The Occupation' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History* (2007) pp. 269

²⁷ Standish, I. *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema* (2000), pp. 120

²⁸ As quoted by Standish, I. in *A New History in Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (2005), pp. 155

ensure that American values were being conveyed to the Japanese public was handled by the newly established CIE (Civil Information and Education Section), who were also tasked with preventing and prohibiting the depiction of previously held Japanese values seen as incompatible with Western consumerist society, such as filial devotion to one's emperor, chauvinism, and death as an honourable pursuit.²⁹

Contrary to desired results, however, the attempts to effectively 'westernize' Japan in line with contemporary capitalist values were not met without some resistance; in fact, the clashing of ideology and political confusion evident in the films of that era have become some of their most defining factors, as exemplified by Isolde Standish's short analysis on Akira Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* (1948):

Kurosawa's 1948 *Yoidore tenshi (Drunken Angel)* is a case in point. The dialogue of Dr Sanada on the rights of women while no doubt appealing to the Civil Information and Education Section (CIE) censorship board, is simultaneously juxtaposed with images of the 'new woman' (Nane, Matsunaga's mistress) who contradicts visually the spoken word. Quite apart from the fact that Japanese, at least mythically, equate action above dialogue in evaluating sincerity, in purely filmic terms, images are often more powerful than dialogue in eliciting empathetic responses. Hence the American censors, working mainly from translations of the screenplay, could feel content that women's rights were being championed, while Japanese audiences, I would argue, could construct an alternative reading which followed the dominant pre-war (ideo)logic that the traditional female role was more desirable than the counter-hegemonic view the Americans sought to impose.³⁰

This rebelliousness towards the Americanization and rooting out of Japanese culture would become a prevalent theme in contemporary literature as well, with much of it also lamenting the loss the Japanese 'spirit' of looking to the needs of one's state before one's own, which in turn popularised communism as a more desirable alternative to western capitalism.³¹ This would result in a political divide that reached its peak in 1960, eight years after the occupation officially ended - although it could be argued that this was merely a nominal event, since the stationing of US troops would remain for a long time to come³² - and five years after the 'post-war period' was officially declared to have passed in conjunction with production reaching its highest point since the pre-war period.³³

²⁹ Standish, I. *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (2005), pp. 155-158

³⁰ Standish, I. *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema* (2000), pp. 6

³¹ Metzler, M. 'The Occupation' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History* (2007), pp. 270 - 271

³² Metzler, M. 'The Occupation' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History* (2007), pp. 275

³³ Sasaki-Uemura, W. 'Postwar Society and Culture' (2007); *A Companion to Japanese History*(2007), pp. 315

It was during this tumultuous period where Imamura first got his start in the film industry. Born in 1926 in downtown Tokyo as the third son to a private doctor, Imamura was brought up in an upper middle-class household. From an early age he developed an interest in theatre (his eldest brother was an actor) and initially dreamt of becoming a stage writer and theatre director. During the tail-end of the war, Imamura's parents were evacuated to Hokkaido, yet Imamura stayed behind, shortly thereafter being enrolled at Waseda University to study Western History at the age of eighteen. His studies interested him little, however, claiming in an interview that he

wasn't a diligent attender of classes; I spent most of my time working with a student theatre group and getting involved with the Communist movement. I was strongly against the continuation of the imperial system, and had many discussions with my friends about Hirohito's responsibility for the war. But my greatest obsession was individual freedom—the condition that the state had denied us absolutely during the war years—and I became fascinated with existentialism. At the time I was making a living from the black market: I bought illicit liquor and cigarettes from soldiers of the American occupation forces and sold them to my professors. That was the only time in my whole life when I was well off, although I spent all I made on drink. [Laughter.] My parents had been evacuated from Tokyo to Hokkaido and hadn't yet returned, and so I was on my own and totally free. I was surrounded by prostitutes and other low-life types, who had great influence on me. I thoroughly enjoyed those times.³⁴

Ultimately, this would become one of the most formative periods in Imamura's life, as well as the time which most strongly informed his fascination with the people who lived on the outer fringes of Japanese society, a fascination that was supposedly partially due to his distaste for his fellow students at the time.

I went to an elite junior high school, and some of my classmates went on to become government ministers. Many of them looked down on people in the medical profession (like my father), and even then they thought of themselves as being somehow above the law—or rather, as members of the social class that controlled the police force. I despised them, and remember thinking that they were the kind of people who would never get close to the fundamental truths of life. Knowing them made me want to identify myself with working-class people who were true to their own human natures. At that age, though, I probably still thought of myself as being innately superior to working-class people.³⁵

It was also at this point in time when Imamura began to take interest in film in earnest, watching a number of European, and, later, also American films. Yet it was a Japanese film that proved to be his most formative viewing experience during that time, namely Akira Kurosawa's aforementioned *Drunken Angel*. 'I found the gangster played by Toshiro Mifune

³⁴ Imamura, S. interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 111

³⁵ Imamura, S. interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 117

incredibly real; he reminded me of people I'd meet on the black market. I thought that Kurosawa must truly be a great director if he could make an actor as bad as Mifune look so real.'³⁶ Thus, following his graduation in 1951, Imamura set his sights on becoming an assistant director to Kurosawa. Though due to a stroke of ill luck, this did not come to pass, as the studio which Kurosawa worked for, Toho studios, were in the midst of a prolonged strike, preventing the company from holding an admission examination that year; instead of waiting, Imamura took the exam for the studio Shochiku, which he passed, thus becoming an assistant director along with six other candidates.

At the time, becoming a director at a studio meant that you first had to prove yourself capable as an assistant director. On paper, the system was intended as a sort of apprenticeship in which the assistant director spends his first few years (possibly as many as ten) assigned to a number of projects helmed by certain directors working with his own group of assistant directors; after a time, most assistant directors would work almost exclusively with a specific director up until the end of their apprenticeship. In practice, it often meant working as a glorified subordinate, keeping one's mouth firmly shut, and following the director's every whim, all the while learning company regulations (as directors only very rarely moved from one studio to another³⁷). This system, arguably feudalistic in nature, would often become a source of contention for assistant directors towards their superiors. 'I never became a great "assistant director" who runs hard at the director's bidding' stated Nagisa Oshima, also an assistant director at Shochiku during the 50s. 'If I thought the work was boring, I'd quit and go home.'³⁸ Based on his own experience, Imamura has said that 'For the first three years assistant directors talk a lot of theory and aesthetics and feel resentful toward the older established directors',³⁹ while future New Wave director Masahiro Shinoda has stated that 'unlike in the university, intelligence meant nothing and he was best off keeping his ideas to himself while doing everything he was told'.⁴⁰

Upon entrance at Shochiku, Imamura was almost immediately assigned to work for Yasujiro Ozu, whom he assisted in the making of three films: *Early Summer (Bakushu, 1951)*, *The Flavour of Green Tea over Rice (Ochazuke no Aji, 1952)* and the critically lauded *Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari, 1953)*. Ozu, along with the far less notable director Yuzo Kawashima,

³⁶ Imamura, S. interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 111

³⁷ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 44 – 45

³⁸ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 45

³⁹ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 45

⁴⁰ Desser, D. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (1988), pp. 45

whom Imamura assisted in making several films, starting with *Aibore Tokoton Daishi* in 1952,⁴¹ would, according to Imamura himself, both have a profound impact on Imamura's life and development as a director. After three years of service, Imamura was approached by the newly arisen Nikkatsu studios, whom he enlisted with after having been advised to do so by Ozu (among others at Shochiku), and worked as an assistant director for another three years before finally being allowed to direct his first feature film: *Stolen Desire (Nusumareta Yokujo)*, 1958).

Already during the early 50s did Imamura in his screenwriting display an interest in the lower – and, in contemporary Japanese film, less explored – echelons of society, stemming from his own experiences as a student. During his time at Shochiku, this interest quickly developed into an insistence on writing about the lives of what Imamura considered to be 'real' Japanese people, largely due to his experiences working as assistant director for Yasujiro Ozu, during which he developed a distaste for the director's style and general approach to filmmaking, perceiving his portrayal of Japanese life as rigid, clichéd and overly aesthetic at the cost of emotional authenticity⁴²⁴³⁴⁴. This was also fostered due to a desire within Imamura to rebel towards his superiors at Shochiku, many of whom viewed Imamura and his fascination with the outcasts and misfits of society as little more than an amusing curiosity. Angered by the belittlement and condensation directed towards both him and the characters he wrote about, he decided that, in his own words, 'if they don't like my ideas and treat them this way then I will only write about oppressed people all my life. I didn't say this openly, but I kept it in my mind.'⁴⁵

Following the release of his fifth film for Nikkatsu, the company decided to lay off Imamura's directorial duties for a couple of years as punishment for having gone over-budget with his latest film while also attempting to discourage him from becoming too independent or rebellious within the company's framework. Never one for loitering about, Imamura took the opportunity to write a number of screenplays, one of which would become the basis for his next directorial work: *The Insect Woman*.

⁴¹ Imamura, S. 'The Sun Legend of a Country Boy' (1969); *Shohei Imamura* (1997), translated from Japanese into Dutch by van Bremen, Geert. & Shashiki, Naoko. Translated into English by von Herk, Frank. pp. 134

⁴² Imamura interviewed by Nakata, (1994); *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 112

⁴³ Imamura, S. interviewed by Ciment, M. in *Positif*, Issue 291; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), translated by Erviel, S. & Cousins, M. pp. 129

⁴⁴ Kendall, N. 'All You Need is Sex' (2002); *The Guardian*

⁴⁵ Imamura interviewed by Phillips, R. 'Japanese film director Shohei Imamura speaks to the World Socialist Web Site' (2000); *World Socialist Web Site*

The Insect Woman was released in 1963; despite sharing a number of thematic similarities to Imamura's earlier films, it nevertheless represented a significant departure from its predecessors in a number of ways, while also paving the way for the remainder of Imamura's output in the 60s. Imamura's continued development as a director is made noticeable here in several ways, perhaps most obviously in the film's comparatively unconventional narrative structure, as well as its rather regular use of unorthodox stylistic devices (for instance, the film makes rather liberal use of freeze frames, both as individual shots and as consecutive shots constituting entire sequences; the former would from this point on become something of a characteristic for Imamura as a director).

While certainly being a different beast than *Pigs and Battleships* – though perhaps in form more so than content – Imamura's transition to a more avant-garde director was anything but sudden, as he found plenty of time to reflect on and reconsider his approach to filmmaking during the years between *Pigs and Battleships* and *The Insect Woman*. In one particular anecdote from this period, Imamura tells of a friend of his, a writer by the name of Shinji Fujiwara, who claimed that *Pigs and Battleships* seemed to him similar to that of a Kurosawa film.

I told him I couldn't see anything wrong with that. 'I got into filmmaking because I wanted to be like Kurosawa,' I said, 'and so I'm not sorry to hear that you think I'm getting there!' But Fujiwara went on to say that he was more interested in seeing an Imamura film than in finding 'the new Kurosawa'. Thanks to conversations like that, my ideas about filmmaking changed a lot during those three years when I wasn't allowed to direct.⁴⁶

The original title of the film, *Nippon Konchuki*, or, *Entomological Chronicles of Japan*, first came to Imamura during the writing process of the film;

I was drinking sake while writing the script when I noticed an insect incessantly circling my ashtray. I thought to myself that my character found herself in somewhat of the same situation, and so I chose the title *Konchuki* (Entomology). Moreover, at the time, I was dating quite a few 'Furyo Shojo' women (delinquents, party girls) who thought once they were in their twenties they should calm down and become 'adults'. This experience confirmed my idea that despite appearances, the mentality of Japanese women has not really changed...⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Imamura interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 115

⁴⁷ Imamura interviewed by Tessier, Max, Bock, Audie. & Buruma, I. in 1977; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 60

In terms of theme and narrative, the film also continued Imamura's filmic explorations of the daily lives of lower-class Japanese women, a result from Imamura's self-proclaimed respect and admiration of the working-class women who Imamura met during his black market days.

Women generally outlive men, which means amongst other things that they're stronger than men. I certainly find them more interesting than men. The women who marked me most in life are the lower-class women I met during my black market days. They weren't educated and they were vulgar and lusty, but they were also strongly affectionate and instinctively confronted all their own sufferings. I grew to admire them enormously.⁴⁸

Another notable development during this time was Imamura's growing interest in social anthropology as a method to better understand human beings, something which would become an informing aspect of Imamura's following films, perhaps best exemplified by his documentary and semi-documentary *History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess* (1970) and *A Man Vanishes* (1967) respectively.

I first tried to gain a sociological perspective and set out to analyze 'reality' through social structures. It didn't take me long to realize that this was very limiting, and so I turned my attention to social anthropology, which took me a lot further in my understanding of human beings. My films *The Insect Woman* and *Intentions of Murder* were founded on those researches.⁴⁹

Of course, social anthropology doesn't provide all the answers. A sociological perspective can be useful too, but that's not enough in itself either. All scientific approaches have their limits. Above and beyond anything else, working as an artist means having a limitless curiosity about human beings. I have no interest in films made by directors who don't care about people.⁵⁰

9.1 Analysis – Story Summary

The story of Tome, the main protagonist of *The Insect Woman*, begins in rural Japan during the winter of 1919. Born to a pair of married farmers, Tome grows up on the countryside and is raised by her parents, who, as it turns out, stop sleeping together early on in Tome's childhood; it is also strongly implied that Tome's father, Chuji, is in fact not Tome's biological father, something which Chuji (and possibly even Tome) seems aware of, even though he refuses to acknowledge it.

After Tome reaches adulthood, and Japan enters the Second World War, she leaves her family's farm to work in a state-owned factory in order to serve her nation and the Japanese

⁴⁸ Imamura interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 116 – 117

⁴⁹ Imamura interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 116

⁵⁰ Imamura interviewed by Nakata, T. in 1994; *Shohei Imamura* (1997), pp. 116

Emperor. In the spring of 1942, however, she receives a letter from her family telling her that her father is dying; she returns to the farm, where she is told that her father is alive and well, and that they merely want her to start working at their landowner's estate. In truth, they practically intend to sell her off to the landowner's youngest son as his wife in order to ensure the family's economic security, claiming that it is about time she marries, both for her and the family's sake. This infuriates Chuji, yet Tome eventually agrees to work at the estate temporarily, although she refuses to marry the landowner's son.

Shortly after she arrives, she is raped by her supposed husband-to-be, who states that because he must go to war in service of the Emperor, she too must 'do her part'; but because Tome is subsequently impregnated, she is sent back to her family, due to pregnancy outside of marriage being considered shameful. Tome later gives birth to a daughter, whom she, much to her family's chagrin, decides to keep – she names the girl Nobuko. She remains at the farm for a short while afterwards, before leaving her daughter behind at the farm in order to work at a far-off mill so that she can support her family (her daughter, specifically) financially.

While working at the mill, she enters into a relationship with the chief clerk; their relationship, as well as Tome's employment at the mill last after the end of the war in 1945. After a few years, however, he decides to leave her after being approached with a promotion, whereas Tome, having become the head of a labour union, is dismissed due to being considered problematic. She then travels to Tokyo where she becomes a maid for a woman named Midori who lives with an American soldier named George. The employment does not last long, due to Midori and George's daughter, Cathy, being scalded to death in a cooking-related accident. Tome, who blames herself for the accident, joins a religious group titled 'The Pure Land Sect' in order to find atonement. There she meets a middle-aged woman who offers her a job as a cleaner at her inn. Tome accepts, but quickly realizes that the inn is in fact an undercover brothel (prostitution being illegal). After being goaded and indirectly threatened by the madam, Tome reluctantly agrees to become a prostitute, seeing it as her only opportunity to earn enough money to support both herself and her daughter reliably.

Tome continues to work at the inn for a few years, befriending the other 'workers' at the inn while also running into Midori, whom she re-establishes her friendship with; the madam, pleased with Tome's efforts, decides to make her 'head maid' so long as she keeps the madam informed regarding the other maid's activities. Tome agrees, but decides to set up clients herself 'on the side' without the madam knowing; she also offers a job to Midori, who no

longer has the financial backing of her 'yankee' (common Japanese slur at the time for Americans) boyfriend. She is also introduced to a wealthy man named Karasawa through the madam, whom Tome eventually enters into a relationship with. At the same time though, Tome is being pressured by the madam, who has found out about Tome's side-activities, warning her that without her (the madam), Tome would be nothing, and that she should remember her place. By a stroke of luck on Tome's part, the madam is then taken in by the police, who suspect her of being involved in prostitution. When Tome is called in for questioning, she agrees to testify against the madam, resulting in the madam being incarcerated. Tome then seizes control of the madam's business, offering the women 70% of the cut in comparison to the 40% offered by the madam; she also restructures the business entirely, making it more difficult for the police to detect.

For a few years, Tome leads a stable life with Karasawa (although whether or not they actually marry is never made explicitly clear); when things turn sour for Karasawa's business, however, Tome begins to worsen her employees' conditions in order to increase her own profits, causing friction between Tome and her former friends. When Tome and Karasawa's financial security continues to worsen, Tome begins to lash out at the women, becoming increasingly abusive and callous in the process. Eventually, Tome severely beats her maid after being confronted for her exploitation; the maid manages to flee, and Tome, while in pursuit, runs into her teenage daughter in the hallway, who has decided to make an untimely surprise visit. Shocked and likewise terrified, Tome immediately seizes her chase and attempts to brush the event away, subsequently dodging any questions regarding her livelihood and the maid's identity. After the situation has cooled down, Nobuko asks her mother if she can lend her 200,000 yen so that she can start her own farm along with some other farming trainees. When questioned about how that would impact her school life, Nobuko reveals that she has dropped out of high school to focus on farming and helping her grandfather, whom she lives with alone due to being repulsed by the rest of the family's abusive behaviour towards them. This angers Tome, who tells her she should 'Reject these crazy ideas' and 'Come to Tokyo and find a good husband.'

Later that day, when the two of them are eating dinner together (along with Karasawa), a telegram arrives for Tome, telling her that her father is dying. We then see Tome and Nobuko making their way across the countryside to their shared place of birth, where they find Chuji on the brink of death, surrounded by the family he and Nobuko left behind. He dies shortly thereafter, with only Tome and Nobuko visibly mourning his death. A funeral for Chuji is

held, but neither Tome nor Nobuko can stand the family's company for long; after a short stint with Nobuko's boyfriend Yoshiji, (whom Tome accuses of tricking her daughter into working on the farm with him and the other trainees) Tome returns to Tokyo. When she arrives, however, she finds that all the prostitutes working for her have vanished without a trace; she is then immediately after taken in by the police, where it is revealed that her activities have been exposed by the maid she assaulted prior to leaving Tokyo with Nobuko. Tome, in a fit of anger, attacks her yet again but is restrained; she proceeds to spend nearly a year of her life in prison.

When she is released, Tome has become visibly worn down by her time in prison; she seems tired and appears to have aged more than ten years, sporting greyned and somewhat unkempt hair, while also appearing much more cautious, vulnerable and easily frightened than she did prior to her incarceration. She seeks out Karasawa but finds him unwilling to resume their relationship; he gives her a small apartment and offers her a job as a cleaning lady before sending her on her way.

While at her new apartment, Tome is once again given a surprise visit from her daughter, this time around wearing short hair and a more fashionable urban get-up, who tells her that she arrived in the city a few months ago to loan the 200 000 yen for the farm. When she learned that her mother had been convicted she approached Karasawa instead, who gave her a counter-offer that she should work for the money instead, offering her temporary residence in the city. When Tome realises that sleeping with Karasawa was also an implicit part of the deal, Tome bursts into a fit of rage and sadness, fearing that her daughter will, like Tome herself, be 'trapped'. While Nobuko ensures to her that she has no plans to let that happen, Tome remains unconvinced. Shortly thereafter, Karasawa attempts to persuade Nobuko to abandon the farm and stay in the city; instead, Nobuko chooses to trick Karasawa into giving her the money, claiming it as a loan that she will pay back when the farm has made enough money, leaving Tokyo in the process. Karasawa, having become obsessed with keeping Nobuko in Tokyo convinces Tome to try to convince Nobuko to return; Tome, wanting Nobuko to live with her so that they can finally live as a family, sets off. After Nobuko is shown living a happy and fulfilling life in the Kurumi Plains with Yoshiji and the other farmers, we see Tome walking alone along a path toward the Plains. The film ends after Tome's sandals break due to the rough terrain; she keeps on walking regardless, saying to herself: 'Just my luck – on top of everything else!'

9.2 Analysis – Themes and Aesthetic

At its core, *The Insect Woman* is a story of self-perpetuating cycles and Sisyphean struggle, both of which are continually reflected in Tome's life throughout the film. From the day she is born to the day when she embarks for the Kurumi Plains, (and possibly beyond, depending on how one chooses to read the film's ending) Tome's life is a life of hardship and persistence in exchange for meagre rewards and rejection by all but those closest to her. For all her toil and hard work, her family (with the exception of her father) repeatedly abuse and downgrade her from a young age. She is accused of selfishness for not sending any of the money she earns at the mill to the family in spite of living well below minimum conditions, almost starving herself in the process. She is mocked for being in a relationship with a man whom she is not married to, and when Tome is impregnated by a man who rapes her, it is Tome who suffers the blame. Even when she finally leaves her family to find work in Tokyo, Tome's lot still never seems to improve in spite of her efforts. She is fired from the mill due to being the head of a union, (a position which her lover suggested that she should helm, followed by him leaving her in exchange for a promotion) and she is practically forced into prostitution after being led on by an older woman to accept work and residence at her inn. Only when Tome herself assumes the role of oppressor, (effectively succeeding her previous employer) and begins to take advantage of women facing similar situations to those of Tome in her youth, does Tome manage to obtain a temporary sense of authority and financial security, both of which ultimately shatters when her victims finally manage to strike back at their oppressor.

There exist two overt themes then which we can safely extrapolate from the film: the first is of how Japanese society (and all which that entails, from culture and tradition to politics and religion) is structured so that women will not, or rather, **cannot**, rebel against their societal roles without continually having to push boulders in an uphill struggle. The only way presented through which women can bypass this is to assist the system by becoming the oppressors themselves – as exemplified by Tome's mother and grandmother, the madam, and, eventually, Tome herself. The second theme, though essentially an extension of the first, involves how this system is unavoidably cyclical, something which is presented primarily through key events in Tome's life. These are often presented as being repetitions of things transpired in the lives of the older women Tome's meets (such as Tome bearing an illicit child like her mother and grandmother did before her, or Tome assuming the madam's position after being responsible for her incarceration, eventually leading to her suffering the same fate at the hands of her maid). Being Tome's daughter, Nobuko's own place in the cycle is a vital

part of the film's narrative, both in how Nobuko's fate ultimately differs from her mother's as well as in how Tome seems to want to (partially, at any rate) divert Nobuko from the path laid down by the cycle. This is exemplified by Tome's fear of her daughter giving birth to a bastard child, ('I hope that girl doesn't have a bastard child too') and her dismay at Nobuko's decision to sleep with Karasawa for the 200 000 yen, convinced that she will eventually be tied down by Karasawa against her will ('Don't you understand why I struggled so hard to raise you?').

At first glance, it might be easy then to point to *The Insect Woman* as being simply a critique of conventional contemporary Japanese society and the gender norms it enforces. That, however, would be to ignore a seemingly peripheral but nonetheless crucial story thread – namely, the growth and development of Japan itself, because just as much as Tome grows and changes over time, so too does the country itself. While the film never stops to detail these historical developments in question, (presumably because the film assumes familiarity with them from the viewer) they are often explicitly acknowledged, be it through mentioning (The Battle of Singapore in 1942, The Korean War which began in 1950) or direct interaction (the student rebellions, so characteristic for 1950s Japan, are a common sight throughout the film). More importantly, their influence is always felt – when the Japanese emperor, for instance, is to deliver his capitulatory speech via radio following the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tome is not actually around to hear it, nor does she even make an attempt to go to her workplace's dining hall where the transmission is being sent, due to having fallen ill because of work and lack of nourishment, having sent all her ration biscuits to her daughter. When her lover walks by, he gives her his own biscuits and decides to stay with her, and eventually begins to caress her body. Just before the emperor addresses the nation, Tome's lover tells her of a rumour he heard from a Japanese soldier that Japan has lost the war. Tome, visibly affected by her lover's words, simply responds 'It's a lie. It can't be true', all the while the camera lingers on the two of them, her lover preoccupied with her body, and Tome left to deal with the uncertainty for what the future holds.

It is an interesting scene, not only for its slow and deliberate pace, but also for how the film seems to refrain from making any kind of direct commentary in spite of the obvious emotional weight present in the scene's concluding shot. The scene begins with an ellipsis, jumping forward a couple of years after Nobuko is born; the shot itself is an eight second long static medium close-up of Tome facing the camera while working at the mill. The sound coming from the machines is loud and invasive but ultimately outdone by the sound of an air

siren; as it cuts to the next shot, a seventeen second static establishing shot showing the mill's interior, a man screaming 'Air raid!' can be heard, causing the female workers to hastily leave their work stations. Tome attempts to do the same but ultimately collapses; her lover, also the man who shouted previously, helps her to her feet and they leave together. This is then followed by another ellipsis, though significantly shorter in scope than the last one, through a smash cut where we once again we see Tome facing the camera, though this time lying down on her right side, the sound of the bustling machines and the air siren seemingly long gone in place of near silence. By far the longest shot of the five, (clocking in at 46 seconds) it is also similarly static with the action carried out entirely by the actors and the mise-en-scène. The two final shots follow suit in this regard, with the first of these being a shot of the rest of the worker's listening to the radio, and the conclusive shot being an extreme close-up of Tome's face in profile as she is being caressed by her lover.

This scene illustrates two of *The Insect Woman's* most defining characteristics: its largely immobile cinematography, and its minimalist approach to scoring. Throughout the scene (and much of the film) there is no non-diegetic music to be heard, nor does the camera change its initial view in any of the shots. Furthermore, none of the shots could be described as being particularly dramatically striking, although four of the shots (excluding the second shot) are rather aesthetic and almost symmetrical in their composition, especially the first and third. It is perhaps here where the 'social anthropology' aspect of the film becomes most apparent, resulting in something that resembles a meeting point between narrative film and observatory style documentary film. The viewer is then treated to a window through which they view Tome's life, but are given little obvious directives for how they should respond emotionally, except, of course, for Tome's own emotiveness. The observatory 'feel' of the film is preserved, and perhaps presented even stronger, in the scenes in which the camera does move, usually in instances of violence between the characters, such as when Chuji goes into a blind rage upon hearing of the family's plan to send Tome to the landowner. Here, the cinematography instead becomes jerky and chaotic, with the camera seemingly struggling to keep up with the actors themselves as they run in and out of the frame at their leisure – even when in frame; the lighting and camera angles sometimes obscure them to the point that they are barely visible anyway.

This is not to say that *The Insect Woman* lacks emotionally manipulative scoring or identifiably dramatic camera composition and lighting, because it most certainly does in numerous instances, examples being the funeral dirge which plays during Chuji's final scene

and the uncomfortably intimate extreme close-ups during the sex scene shared by Nobuko and Karasawa. More often than not though, the effect is ambiguous and rarely easy to pinpoint, something which stands in staunch opposition to Imamura's preceding film *Pigs and Battleships*, which favoured far more mobile cinematography, faster editing and dramatic scoring.

9.3 Analysis – *The Insect Woman* and *Early Summer*

I could go on about the individual intricacies that make up *The Insect Woman*, and, indeed, there is a lot to delve into, with the previous part of this analysis just barely scratching the surface. There exists a lot to take away from it, and as such, there are a number of ways in which it could be approached; but to try and tie it back to this essay's original intent, we are going to have to limit ourselves to a simple comparative study between it and the first film Imamura worked on during his time at Shochiku: *Early Summer*, released in Japan in 1951.

Earlier in this essay I brought up how *Early Summer* and *The Insect Woman* share a number of thematic similarities but choose to address them in different ways. Specifically I am referring to how both of these films address the role of the woman in a post-war context, ultimately tying into questions of Japanese identity, modernity and family life in the face of the rapid cultural developments and political shifts brought on by the occupation. These thematic concerns are most evidently reflected in the film's respective main characters: Tome and Noriko.

Like Tome, Noriko is a woman born during the democratic 'Taishō period' (1912 – 1926) who spent most of her years growing up during the militarist years of the 'Showa period', (beginning in 1927) becoming an adult a few years before the post-war period began in 1945. Unlike Tome, however, who grew up on the countryside in a life of poverty and emotional abuse, Noriko's childhood was mostly in that of Tokyo, growing up in a stable, financially secure household provided by loving, well-meaning parents.

Upon first glance, these two people, and the lives they lead, seem worlds apart. To Tome, life is a continuous struggle for survival, a dog-eat-dog world where only those willing to take advantage of others are ultimately able to procure a life of safety, and, by extension, happiness. Noriko, on the other hand, has never in her life had to worry about starving, about not having a place to sleep, or about being sold off by her family into a life of prostitution; instead, she lives a calm and quiet life as part of an extended family consisting of her parents

and her older brother with his wife and two sons. As for her personality, she's free-spirited and generally considered a bit odd by those around her, being something of an outgoing introvert; she works a stable job at an office, and spends most of her time with her own particular group of friends. While her life has not been without hardship, (her second brother is presumed dead after having disappeared during his time as a soldier in the war) she still largely comes off as a kind and gentle (if, at times, a bit distant) person, seemingly content with life as it is.

However, different though their lives may be, they are still both subjected to a shared societal pressure: finding a husband. Throughout both films, the idea of marriage is consistently brought up as the most important part of a woman's life, the part where a woman takes her final steps into adulthood, leaves her old family name behind, and finally achieves true happiness. In Tome's case it is something which she is expected to do not only as a means of growing up but also as part of her duty to her family, who early in the film cite Tome's sister-in-law, Rui, as a positive counter-example for how a dutiful daughter should be: someone who marries into another family as a means of supporting one's own family. When the landowner's son, Shunzu, arrives to take Tome to his father's farm, Tome rejects him, telling him that she does not want to go because her feet hurt. In response, Tome's grandmother simply tells Shunzu to 'Never mind her. Just take her', after which she is promptly dragged off by Shunzu and his friends.

Noriko is never forced into anything the same way Tome is, but the pressure to marry remains a constant throughout *Early Summer* nonetheless, both from her family as well as due to societal norms and expectations, something which is intrinsically tied into the film's narrative. Early in the film, Noriko's family receives a visit from Noriko's aging uncle, who, in a scene where he is drinking tea with Noriko's father, asks Noriko how old she is. When she replies that she is twenty-eight, Noriko's father says 'About time to marry', to which the uncle smiles and nods. The uncle then says 'Some women don't want to get married' followed by him asking Noriko if she is one of them. Noriko, however, merely smiles and laughs, and proceeds to leave the room afterward, with her uncle and father laughing as well. Later, one of Tome's co-workers asks Noriko if she would be interested in him introducing her to an old friend of his as a potential match. Noriko attempts to decline the offer as politely as possible but ultimately agrees to at least 'consider it'. Her disinterest is evident, yet rumour spreads, and before long, several of those closest to Noriko find out about this potential future husband. When the family finds out that the man in question is both well-endowed and from a

respectable family, they become increasingly adamant in making Noriko accept the proposition, particularly her brother. In an unexpected twist of fate however, the mother of Kenkichi Yabe (one of Noriko's childhood friends) suddenly asks Noriko if she would marry her son instead. To the mother's great surprise, Noriko agrees.

In *Early Summer*, the idea that a woman can only find happiness through marriage is questioned; in *The Insect Woman* it is rejected outright. In both cases though, this questioning/rejection are likewise used to bring up the same fundamental question: How has Japanese society been impacted by the consequences of the war, and how, if at all, have the role of women changed because of it?

These questions are reflected in both films in a number of ways. First off, both films share a clear emphasis on generational gaps, and how the results of the war have widened the divide between them. Of these, there exist three generational groups which we can clearly identify in both films: those who were born and grew old before 1945, those who were born and grew up before the war but have spent most of their young adult years in the post-war era, and finally, those who grew up as children after the war. In both films, matters of tradition, modernity and individual values are used in order to distinguish the three from one another.

In *Early Summer* this generational gap serves as the most pivotal source of conflict between Noriko and her family because of their clashing interests regarding Noriko's future. Whereas Noriko at no point display an active interest in marriage prior to accepting Yabe's mother's proposition, her parents and older brother go to great lengths at ensuring Noriko receives a great 'match' (e.g. a man with a career, prospects and respectable parents) as her fiancé. At no point do they seem to doubt that marrying is something Noriko will eventually do as a natural part of her life. The viewer is then presented with a generational conflict where the main character Noriko, despite evidently leading a satisfying life, has her happiness confronted by a widespread societal perception of what a woman's happiness is actually supposed to be. This conflict could then be perceived as being representative of the overall clash at the time between the traditions of pre-war Japan with the new Western ideals brought in by the US, where women were encouraged to take on more independent roles considered atypical by older, more traditionalist Japanese people. Also, when Noriko decides to marry Kenkichi, she explains it as a choice made due to Kenkichi the fact that she feels like she can trust him, and not because she loves him. While her actual reasoning for choosing him is logical on paper, she expresses no clear joy over her decision. In fact, in the film's penultimate scene, where

she realizes that her choice will separate her from her family and the life she has led thus far, she breaks down into tears. It would appear then that, despite the assurance from her friends that she is doing the right thing, Tome is, in actuality, anything but happy to give up her current life.

In *The Insect Woman*, things are a bit different in that, instead of presenting the contemporary generational conflict as something wherein the older generations struggle to understand the younger ones while enforcing their own values in the process, *The Insect Woman* uses it as a means to show how the Japanese women, and the Japanese people overall, have not really changed in spite of the war. This is most strongly evidenced by the emphasis on the 'cycle' in the film, in which Tome, in spite of her best efforts, repeat the actions and mistakes of those who came before her; Japan's development to a democratic country is then presented as superficial and hypocritical in that society ultimately remains the same. By contrast, Tome's daughter, Nobuko, becomes the first to break the cycle because she rejects both the old traditionalist ways of Japan as well as the new capitalist ways endorsed by the new government.

It is interesting that Imamura took such a staunch stance against Ozu's films because, when you compare them side by side, you begin to understand that both directors ultimately expressed a shared interest for the plights of the younger generation while also criticizing the older generations for their stubbornness in strictly adhering to an older mind-set which the younger generations simply could not relate to. The difference, of course, is that Ozu did so from the viewpoint of someone belonging to the older generation, whereas Imamura was part of the very younger generation being constrained by their elders, positions which are evident in both directors' films respectively. As such, it is perhaps hardly surprising that Imamura would develop a rebellious attitude toward Ozu's films, which, in spite of their subject matters, still represent a largely traditional view of Japanese filmmaking in their pursuit of aesthetic completeness. And if there is one area where *Early Summer* and *The Insect Woman* differ, it is in their respective tones and visual style. In this context, Ozu represents, of course, the 'picture card' view of Japan, filled with lush forests, mountains, and picturesque towns, all captured through cinematography and mise-en-scène which emphasizes symmetry and visual beauty with an almost painting-like sensibility, hardly ever using the camera kinetically or to emphasize a very specific mood or emotion. By comparison, *The Insect Woman* is rarely shot in way where it could be described as being particularly pretty to look at, often favouring harsh high-contrast lighting, chaotic interior designs, and unpredictable angles. This extends

to the characters, settings and dialogue as well, which come off as noticeably more shocking and gratuitous when compared to those of *Early Summer*.

Being the radical alternative, *The Insect Woman* certainly comes off as the more ‘real’ or ‘truthful’ film when compared to *Early Summer*, which, with its polite and well-spoken cast, beautifully constructed sets, and consistent high-key lighting, seems just a bit too perfect to really feel ‘real’. It should be noted, however, that when *The Insect Woman* is placed in its proper historical context, it quickly reveals itself as a product of its time, made during a period where young male Japanese directors were flocking by the dozens to make ‘real’ and ‘explicit’ films confronting the hypocrisies and double standards of Japanese society. That in itself does not of course take away from the film’s authenticity as a societal critique, but it is worth noting that the Japan portrayed in *The Insect Woman* is a Japan painted by an individual evidently disappointed and frustrated by the contemporary state of the country. Perhaps then we should not view *The Insect Woman* (along with the rest of Imamura’s films) as the more ‘real’ alternative to Ozu, but rather as something existing on the other side of the spectrum, showing a very different side of Japanese society from an entirely different perspective.

10. Conclusion

This essay ended up being quite a bit more bifurcated than originally intended, but if anything, that alone should demonstrate the complexity of the subjects dealt with in this text and the difficulty in approaching them. The overarching implications of post-colonialism and orientalism, the dangers of eurocentrism in analytical writing and how it can be best avoided, and of course both *The Insect Woman* and *Early Summer* themselves, could all easily fill up an essay of this magnitude and beyond with ease. As such, this essay could be rightfully criticized as something of a vanity project, delving into a large number of issues which are ultimately beyond both its reach and grasp when confronted in conjunction with one another.

At the beginning of this essay, I wrote that ‘This essay represents an attempt to further the understanding of the films by Japanese New Wave director Shohei Imamura through the use of post-colonial theory, and political and cultural contextualisation’. While I cannot say with certainty if I have actually succeeded on any of those points, I still maintain that it is a line worth pursuing further, though preferably in a format which allows for much deeper discussion.

The idea to write this essay largely came to be due to Imamura's statement that he did not believe that Westerners could possibly understand what he in his films was talking about. Certainly, when dealing with foreign cinema, there are bound to be subtle touches which will inevitably fly over one's own head; it is something which I can attest to personally, having watched both *The Insect Woman* and *Early Summer* several times each, and still be perplexed by the smallest of gestures in both films. But if anything, those moments of perplexion should be an incentive to attempt to comprehend, rather than simply conceding defeat when faced with cultural barriers. In fact, it is most likely only by acknowledging one's lack of understanding that one truly begin to see beyond one's own culturally limited perspective since it forces a reconsideration of cultural values and context before drawing one's own conclusions.

At the end of his essay *The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order*, Yoshimoto wrote the following: 'Let us debunk once and for all the imperialist logic of questions based on the self/Other dichotomy. Let us go back to that spirit of true radicalism that once made film studies such an exciting space for critical thinking.'⁵¹ To bring that quote into the context of this essay, it is necessary to not only observe the foreign in a way that subordinates it to one's own cultural perception of the norm, but also necessary to be willing to effectively 'unlearn' previously acquired comprehension of film theory in order to approach film cultures not taken into consideration when those specific theories were first outlined – 'emptying the cup', so to speak.

There exists no workaround to the limits of the outside observer, yet it is also a limitation which is opposed upon constantly in both study as well as everyday life, so much so that it becomes ironic that Imamura claimed Westerners should be unable to understand his films, since he himself made films mostly about women and lower-class people – two groups which he himself was never a part of, and only possessed experience of as an outside observer. What is important is not strictly the limitations themselves but how we chose to work with them and for what purposes we observe, why we decide to raise questions. If an outside perspective is to have worth, we need to be critical of to whom it actually has worth to; after all, what purpose is there for cross-cultural study if it does nothing but benefit the observer? By expanding this line of reasoning through the furthering of post-colonial and orientalist study on non-Western film, we can not only broaden our cultural and political understanding of film

⁵¹ Yoshimoto, M. 'The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Films Studies and the Postcolonial World Order' (1991); *Film Theory and Criticism Eighth Edition* (2016), pp. 884

in a global context, and how those cultural and political factors in turn affect the form and narrative of film, but also use it as an opportunity to truly globalize film studies without having to rely on arbitrary cultural dichotomies.

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