

Timeline for a Timeless Story

by Jim O'Rourke

Musician, producer, and filmmaker **Jim O'Rourke** places *Funeral Parade of Roses* within a cultural lineage of intense creativity and political ferment.

**"I am the wound and the knife!
I am the lash and the cheek..."**

— from Charles Baudelaire's "L'Héautontimorouménos"
(collected in *Les Fleurs du mal*, 1857).¹

Funeral Parade of Roses is a dense and complex testament to the alignment of the historical machinations, filmic, political, and personal, that reached a fever point in the Summer of 1968. It is the child of a rich moment in history where all of the art forms commingled in an incredibly free playing field. It initially reflects the unique mix of aesthetics drawn from Matsumoto Toshio's early work with Jikken-Kobo (Experimental Workshop),

a group formed in 1951 dedicated to new ideas in interdisciplinary art. Among its members were painters, photographers, multimedia artist Yamaguchi Katsuhiko, composers Takemitsu Toru and Yuasa Joji, and, freshly graduated from the art department of Tokyo University, a young Matsumoto. It was here that he worked on his first film, the promotional short *Bicycle (Ginrin)*, 1955), a bold hybrid made in collaboration with Takemitsu and Yamaguchi. But how did a young cinephile such as Matsumoto navigate through these different methods of filmmaking and the rapidly changing social and political landscape of a post-World War II Japan to arrive at *Funeral Parade of Roses*? This is the backstory to Matsumoto's film, a condensed timeline for a timeless story.

From the beginning, Japanese major film studios held a strong grip on production and distribution, usually owning the theatres as well. By the early 1920s some directors had started their own production companies, such as Kinugasa Teinosuke, who made his still famous *A Page of Madness (Kurutta ippeji)* in 1926. While Kinugasa may have set out on his own for artistic reasons, financial considerations were also a concern. Popular actors also formed their own companies to hold more control over material and receive a larger percentage of the profits. This is not to imply there were cracks forming in the foundation of the studio system, as it was still necessary for independents to licence films to them for distribution purposes.

Standing further outside were films financed by the

burgeoning socialist and communist movements in Japan. These studios, best known under the name "Proletarian Film League," were primarily interested in advocating their concerns in union and labour struggles. The rise of communist sympathies in Japan would play an important part in encouraging the Japanese New Wave cinema of the 1960s.

By the end of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, which accelerated the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II and the Bolshevik Revolution, Japan had secured a foothold in Korea and Taiwan. The peace treaty between the two, negotiated by US President Theodore Roosevelt, was seen by many in Japan as an insult. It granted them less land rights and little if any of the monetary reparations expected. This perceived slight was only magnified after Japan's collaboration with Allied forces during World War I. By the end of the war, American policy towards Japan had become increasingly combative, making an effort to influence the British Government, who had a long history of collaboration with the Japanese Navy, to follow suit. This increasing slight from Western powers, who had, relatively speaking, only recently been accepted into Japan, laid the groundwork for the continuation of Japan's territorial ambitions. By 1932 a puppet government was established in Japan-occupied Manchuria (Manchukuo), and in 1937 troops moved into China proper, starting a war which would last into World War II. ²

In 1934, communism was outlawed by the Japanese government, effectively bringing an end to the



independent production companies such as the PFL, casting out or even imprisoning many filmmakers, writers, teachers and others sympathetic with the left. The larger film companies also found themselves hampered by mandatory submission to a censor board regulated by the Army and Navy Ministries, which strictly promoted the ideals of the traditional family and the value of sacrifice for the country. The influence of imported films with their ideas of individualism and the continuing prevalence of what were called "modern girls" (*moga*, the Japanese equivalent of flappers) were to be suppressed. Imports of American films were severely curtailed and with the passage of the "Film Law" in 1939, everyone who worked in the film industry, from entry-level assistants to leading actors and actresses, was required to be tested for competency and licenced. By the early 1940s they were required by the law to consolidate under an umbrella of major film companies which included Shochiku, Toho, and Daiei.

The effect of the Occupation at the end of World War II fills volumes of books, and while it is difficult to even scratch the surface here, it is important to note the profound effect it had on Matsumoto's generation of filmmakers. The changes required by the peace settlement pulled the roots out from under innumerable layers of society. Religious and political persecution during the previous era was rescinded and communists, Christians, Marxists and others flooded back into the population. The major studios, already financially strapped, now had conflicts with the newly emboldened unions with strong leftist sympathies. These conflicts

grew to such an extent that, for example, military forces had to be called in to assist, as in the Toho strike of 1949.

By the end of the 1940s the Allied forces refocused their energies on the growing power of Russia and China. Leftist sympathisers, who were only recently seen as emancipated political prisoners, were again under duress. Conflicts with the labour unions, growing problems with the Zengakuren (the umbrella organisation for college student government groups) as well as the American government's own shifting priorities resulted in a sweeping anti-communist purge in all levels of society. In the film industry, technicians, composers, writers and directors lost their jobs, forcing many of them to look towards other means in order to continue working. Many of these films were funded in part by labour unions or even the Communist Party itself, and had to be independently distributed, sometimes by Hokusei Eiga, which was primarily a distributor for films from the Soviet Union. Some of these films could still find their way into mainstream cinemas, as many major studios, still under the pressure of union strife, could not keep up the rate of production needed to fill their screens. Assistant directors were promoted to help speed production, setting the stage for what is generally now called Japan's New Wave. At Nikkatsu, Suzuki Seijun and Imamura Shohei were given their start, and at Shochiku, Oshima Nagisa, Shinoda Masahiro, and Yoshida Yoshishige began with great promise. But by the mid-1960s all three had left Shochiku under acrimonious circumstances, most famously when Oshima's *Night and Fog in Japan* (*Nihon no yoru to kiri*, 1960), a drama that investigated the

moral and political differences between two generations of leftists, was withdrawn from distribution after only a few days. Although the three organised their own production companies, they still relied on the studios for distribution. It was purportedly a time of sweeping change, but the traces of the recent past would prove to be indelible. This uneasy balancing act of the past and present is personified in the conflicting character of Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, who had a long and controversial career in politics. During World War II, Kishi was Minister of Commerce and Industry under Prime Minister Tojo Hideki, and fully involved in the activities in Manchuria. At the end of the war, Kishi was tried and convicted as a war criminal, resulting in his barring from public service as accorded by the Allied forces. In 1952, this restriction was lifted and Kishi began the second wave of his political career in the Democratic Party, a forerunner of the Liberal Democratic Party. It was this changing political and artistic landscape that would make Matsumoto question his own nascent work as a documentary filmmaker.

In an interview with Aaron Gerow, Matsumoto said: "Even literature and art were wrapped around the little finger of the state during the war. Well, the people who made national propaganda films collaborating with the war effort made an about-face when America arrived after the war and in a blink of the eye began making democratic movies. That was strange because filmmakers did that without going through a stage of internal conflict, without exposing their own responsibility for the war. Both during and after the war, they made films according to



the dominant trends in society or government without thoroughly investigating their own position within this. In the film world in particular, people didn't independently pursue their own wartime responsibility. The kind of character that's able to immediately make democratic movies while feigning ignorance about the past is what ruined postwar Japanese cinema. That's why, even in terms of the problem of realism, there was no difference between the realism of militarist films fanning war sentiment and the realism of postwar democratic motion pictures. Only the topic or subject changed." ³

Matsumoto initially made documentary films for Shin Riken Cinema, one of many studios dedicated to the form. He soon started an organisation called the "Association of Documentary Filmmakers" and published the highly polemical magazine *Documentary Film (Kiroku-eiga)*. Producers such as Shin Riken and Iwanami Productions would prove to be auspicious places for this new generation of filmmakers to begin their careers. Matsumoto worked through all levels of production, a relatively liberal education that encouraged him to reconcile his own concerns through documentary films. ⁴

In his student days, Matsumoto had been inspired by the revelations of Italian neorealist and avant-garde films and he searched for a way to fuse his seemingly disparate interests. This contrast, and his thoughts on their ability to coexist is especially enlightening in the context of the form of *Funeral Parade of Roses*. In his interview with Gerow, Matsumoto spoke of his attempts to bring the

two together: "Both were extremely fascinating to me, but that's where problems arose. Although I found the freedom of avant-garde's uninhibited, imaginative world extremely attractive, it had the tendency to get stuck in a closed world. Documentaries, on the other hand, while intensely related to reality, would not really thoroughly address internal mental states and were so dependent upon their temporal contexts they would look old-fashioned if their temporal context changed. I wondered whether the point of collision between the limitations and strong points of the two forms could not pose a new set of topics for cinema." ⁵

His early work with Jikken-Kobo would prove to be influential, as Matsumoto collaborated again with Takemitsu on his documentary *The Song of Stones (Ishi no uta, 1963)*. This film, about stone cutters in Shikoku, was a radical shift in Matsumoto's documentary work, closer to a tone poem than to straightforward documentation. The synergy between music, space, movement and stillness was a subtle but radical synthesis of Matsumoto's stylistic and aesthetic experiences. Soon, the influence of the world pounding on art's walls would prove to be unavoidable.

In 1960, with the impending renegotiation of US occupation (the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, better known by its Japanese shorthand name "ANPO") protest grew to a feverish pitch. The Zengakuren sieged Haneda airport to prevent Prime Minister Kishi from flying to the US, and while it did not prevent the flight, the press coverage was considerable.

By this time the group had nearly severed ranks with the socialist democratic and communist parties, disagreeing bitterly over the worth of political versus direct action. In June of 1960, the Zengakuren opted to attack the Diet Building in an assault that would result in the death of student Kanba Michiko, who would stand as a martyr-symbol for years to come. A further protest at Narita made a blunder of White House press secretary James Haggerty's trip to prepare for President Dwight Eisenhower's forthcoming visit. Although Prime Minister Kishi was forced to delay Eisenhower's already highly contentious visit, the treaty was renewed in 1960.

With the rise of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966, passions were further inflamed on campuses throughout Japan. During the next few years, the Zengakuren fractured and split into factions with varying degrees of allegiance to the Communist Party. What had previously been a face of unity dispersed into various concerns such as the American bases in Okinawa. Their possible use as a base of operations for American expansion into Vietnam implicitly involved Japan in military action, something it had been forbidden from under the terms of the peace treaty. Student-government organisations continued physical confrontations with university officials at Tokyo's Keio and Waseda Universities, amongst many others, as well as recruitment for the growing resistance to the expansion of Narita Airport, infringing on the land rights of farmers. At first they received overwhelming support from the general public for their physical confrontations with construction workers, but by 1968, the time of the filming of *Funeral Parade of Roses*, US



nuclear aircraft carriers were docking in Okinawa and involvement at the student protests even included high school children. By this time the early public support for these actions had begun to wane, as continuing violence both on campus and in urban areas had begun to wear out their welcome with many who were now just wanting to move on with their lives. In *Funeral Parade of Roses* the interviewed student protester seems almost like an outlaw, on the run from a society that just does not want to hear from students anymore.

Theatre groups also began to make a break from their past traditions. Many took their productions to alternative locations, such as Kara Juro's "Situation Theatre," which used its red tent to move from place to place (This group, as well as its tent, are featured prominently in Oshima's *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (*Shinjuku dorobo nikki*, 1968)). Legendary playwright Terayama Shuji would also explore similar confrontational methods with his Sajiki Tenjo group, many times treating the audience as trapped victims. This street-theatre also overlapped with the growing movement of Fluxus related artists such as Genpei Akasegawa (Hi-Red Centre) and the Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension) group, whose discordant "happenings" can be seen scattered throughout *Funeral Parade of Roses*. The group was started in Nagoya by Kato Yoshihiro and Iwata Shinichi who soon became infamous for their "ceremonies," as they chose to call them. Moving to Tokyo, their performances were noted for their nudity and unabashed confrontation with shoppers in the major neighbourhoods of Shinjuku, Ginza, and Shibuya. While generally ignored or even

attacked by contemporary art criticism, Zero Jigen did find itself regularly chronicled in newspapers and magazines, usually under racy headlines likening them to "orgies" or "porn parties." Unlike this inflammatory rhetoric, Zero Jigen created situations that were more in sympathy to the "ritualistic" concerns of many artists of the time, replacing overt political or literary references with a series of interchangeable movements, props, and heavy use of repetition.

Experimental film, which reaches back to the roots of Matsumoto's early fascinations, and the new generation which was embracing the then-new video medium, is personified in "Guevera," a critical hybrid of the many different movements that formed the underground. These activities were led in Japan by such filmmaker/artists as Iimura Takahiko and Katsuhiko and coalesced in events such as the important "Tokyo-New York Video Express" of 1974, which brought together many interdisciplinary artists such as Paik Nam June, Kubota Shigeo, Woody and Steina Vasulka, Michael Snow, Kosugi Takehisa, and even Allen Ginsberg. The electronic manipulation of television in Guevera's film invokes the work of Paik, Yamaguchi, and Matsumoto himself, and the statement "But you must feel something with your body" makes an allusion to the growth of "system" or "structuralist" films that were concurrent to the rise of video/television art. Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) were two of the most internationally known films that explored the actual physical effect of time, light, and space on the viewer's sense of consciousness, and was readily co-opted by many as an accessory to "mind-

expansion." Matsumoto himself would later make several films using his footage from *Funeral Parade of Roses*' "experimental film." In the background of these scenes you can also see the requisite poster for Terayama and Sajiki's *Rope (Jun)* designed by Yokoo Tadanori. Just these scenes alone demonstrate the incredible commingling of the rebirth of all of the arts, and their cohabitation.

Another element of "underground culture" (*angura*) is referenced through Eddie's participation in a pornographic film shoot, which not only heightens the complex "reality / fiction" structure of the film, but also makes a contemporary reference to the rise of underground pornography. The director in this scene is Matsumoto, who despite not making such films himself, was related in spirit to many of the new wave of pornographic, or "pink", filmmakers. Directors found increasingly creative ways to skirt the censor, and due to its incredible revolving door production schedule and high demand for product, pornography was one of the easiest ways for a young filmmaker to get his hands on a camera. This open door policy allowed filmmakers with political and avant-garde interests (such as Adachi Masao); beefs with authority (such as Wakamatsu Koji); and highly analytical and theoretical writers (such as Yamatoya Atsushi) the latitude to create films, albeit on incredibly small budgets, in an environment that was previously closed to them. These three filmmakers are of special interest in the context of *Funeral Parade of Roses*, as they also worked with ATG (Art Theatre Guild), who would fund and release Matsumoto's film,



and become a nexus for the zeitgeist of the late 1960s. Adachi (also involved with Hi-Red Centre) and Yamatoya (maybe best known in the West as the author of Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967)) represented the talent that was coming from "film study groups" at various universities, and they, like Matsumoto, were filmmakers who had their fingers on the increasing pulse of unrest in Japan. There was collusion with other directors like Oshima (Adachi for example co-wrote *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* and participated in the first ATG film, Oshima's brilliant farce *Death by Hanging* (*Koshikei*, 1968)). Wakamatsu and Adachi's masterpiece *Ecstasy of the Angels* (*Tenshi no kokotsu*, 1972, also for ATG) is another film, like *Funeral Parade of Roses* which timelessly manifested this moment of critical mass.

Doubtless, most pink film production was for the purpose of profit, and these efforts would become accepted into the mainstream as part of Nikkatsu's "pink film" (*pinku eiga*) and the "pinky violence" films that were released primarily by the Toei studio. One popular Toei series was the "sukeban" films. A "sukeban" is the leader of a girl gang (dropouts, ne'er do wells, etc), and *Funeral Parade of Roses* features such a gang, sent out to rough up Eddie. The sequence both mimics and satirises their mannerisms, and while it would be a bit much to say that Matsumoto made the first "sukeban" short, he seems to have been a few years ahead of the curve!

It becomes apparent that all of these disparate movements seemed to share a central hub, and geographically that was East Shinjuku, a convergence

of all that was outside the lines. The intermingling of all the arts was not only an aesthetic choice, but the reality of everyone being drawn to one small area, filled with old style coffee shops (*kissaten*), hippies, galleries, bars (both gay and otherwise), protesters, expatriates of every stripe, musicians, filmmakers, writers, philosophers, and of course police. It was the most contaminated of petri dishes, and that means culture. It was here that the ATG was born. I will concede here to the accompanying text by Roland Domenig to more fully expand on the importance of the ATG, and how it was not only a child of the history above, but the new beginning of one of Japan's most brilliant eras of film.

REFERENCES

- 1 The original French reads: "Je suis la plaie et le couteau! / Je suis le soufflet et la joue..."
- 2 Even today, what to call this war, or even to call it such, is a continuing source of tension between China and Japan.
- 3 Matsumoto Toshio (1996) interviewed by Aaron Gerow in *Documentary Box 9* (December 31).
- 4 Also working at Iwanami was Suzuki Tatsuo, who would later serve as cinematographer on *Funeral Parade of Roses*. It was common at Iwanami to use a tripod-mounted camera, in part for aesthetic reasons, and also because handheld cameras at that time were still cumbersome and noisy. Suzuki, however, became well known for his incredibly reliable and elegant hand-held camerawork and mastery of telescopic lenses. In his earlier feature films, such as Yoshida's *A Story Written with Water* (*Mizu de kakareta monogatari*, 1965) and Kuroki Kazuo's *Silence Has No Wings* (*Tobenai chinmoku*, 1966), Suzuki's handling of the similar themes explored in Matsumoto's film are enlightening.
- 5 Matsumoto Toshio (1996).