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The Making of An Auteur: Shōhei Imamura's Early Films (1958-1959)

Jennifer Coates

Shōhei Imamura's first four films have received significantly less academic and critical attention than his work from 1960 onwards. *Stolen Desire* (*Nusumareta yokujō*, 1958), *Ginza Station* (aka *Lights of Night*, *Nishi Ginza eki mae*, 1958), and *Endless Desire* (*Hateshinaki yokubō*, 1958), made at Nikkatsu Studios, have been largely dismissed, with *My Second Brother* (*Nianchan*, 1959) credited with bringing Imamura to critical and academic attention. This chapter takes a closer look at the contents and reception of these early films, investigating their relation to critical and popular understanding of Imamura's auteur persona and oeuvre.

For critics such as Jasper Sharp, these early films are 'uncharacteristic' (2011: 93). Yet if we look closely at their themes, casting, language, and settings, we can see many central components of Imamura's later work evident in these early studio films. This chapter argues that this early career stage already exhibits Imamura's key thematic, stylistic, and political concerns. The final section takes a closer look at *My Second Brother* to understand how this fourth film enabled Imamura to win over professional film critics. While the dominant story of Imamura's career situates *My Second Brother* as the work in which he found his authorial voice, I want to suggest that this voice is discernible much earlier. Imamura's first three films are in fact strongly characteristic, not only of his later work, but also of his public-facing auteur persona.

The auteur's origin story

In analyzing these early films in reference to Imamura's auteur persona, I am not necessarily subscribing to auteur theory itself, but rather practicing a kind of critical auteur studies. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto has identified two strands of auteurist criticism in relation to writing on Japanese cinema: classical and revisionist (2000: 12). Classical auteurist criticism assesses the director's work as transcending the time and place of its making, and understands the film text as an expression of its maker's consistent and coherent 'personal expression' (Yoshimoto 2000: 55). Following Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who argued for the author as 'a function of discourse' (Yoshimoto 2000: 57) post-structuralist critics challenged classical auteurism. Later revisionist auteurism such as that developed by Peter Wollen attempted to disengage auteur criticism from the person of the auteur, understanding the auteur instead as a kind of deep structure permeating films made by a particular director. Yoshimoto argues that the issue with Wollen's separation of the director as person from the director's name as an indication of a cluster of descriptive features is that the choice of the director's name to refer to a set of structural and stylistic features is still not explained or interrogated (2000: 58). Going back to the conception of the auteur as a function of discourse, I explore how Imamura's name became an indication of a set of stylistic and narrative components through the intervention of the popular press in the crafting of his auteur persona. In this case, the director's name and his public persona become inseparable from his film's style and content, as critics and journalists insist on the connection between these elements.

Following Yoshimoto's identification of 'specific kinds of institutional constraint and disciplinary configuration' that have shaped Japanese cinema scholarship (2000: 54), I focus here on the role of Japanese print media in creating an auteur, and how the early work of a particular director may be used to create a distinct

auteur persona. While I am arguing here that the qualities we associate with Imamura's later work and auteur persona are present in his first four films, I am not attempting to incorporate these works into the canon of Imamura's critically acclaimed oeuvre, in an attempt at rehabilitating these texts to fit a classical auteurist model. Instead, I focus on how critics and journalists used these texts to build an auteur persona around Imamura. A seemingly coherent public persona is built through film exhibition, criticism, and the appearance of the auteur or their film texts in popular media. I aim to demonstrate that the critical acclaim Imamura's fourth and subsequent films received was not necessarily contingent on Imamura becoming a better filmmaker, whatever that might mean. Rather, critical acclaim followed the building and marketing of a coherent auteur persona through the first three films and their media coverage.

I am approaching the persona of the auteur in a critical light here, inspired by Richard Dyer's work on star persona. Dyer argues for the star persona as constituted not only by the actor's actual work playing roles on film or television, but also by critical and journalistic coverage of the star and their imagined real life (Dyer 2004: 2-3). Japanese post-war film journals, newspapers, and gossip magazines published material on prominent directors as well as stars. In fact journals such as *Kinema Junpō* participated in the creation and promotion of an auteur system similar to that recognized by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which exerted some influence on global film criticism from its first issue in 1951. Of course, *Kinema Junpō* and *Eiga Geijutsu* (*Film Art*), the two high-brow film journals which ushered Imamura into the canon of Japanese auteurs, significantly pre-date the founding of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Yet Jim Hillier argues that it is 'a pretty widespread' contention that the development of this particular style of film criticism was greatly indebted to French film criticism, and

particularly *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1985: 1). *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Kinema Junpō* had a degree of cross-fertilization in the 1950s, as *Cahiers*, newly ‘discovering’ Japanese cinema, re-printed translated material from *Kinema Junpō*, such as the filmography of Kenji Mizoguchi (Kriegel-Nicholas 2016: 228). Both magazines styled reviews in a similar manner, structuring an account of the critic’s encounter with the film in question in terms of the critic’s own expectations and preferences.

Cahiers du Cinéma, *Kinema Junpō*, and *Eiga Geijutsu* also printed yearly ‘Best Ten’ rankings organized by studio and director. *Kinema Junpō* produced a number of special issues each year designed to rank directors by critical acclaim, from the ‘Who’s Who’ editions which listed the directors, actors, and writers considered most notable in the studio system, to the intermittent issues devoted to ‘Film Directors of the World’ (*Sekai no eiga sakka zenshu*) which ranked acclaimed directors by fame and nationality. Whole issues were given over to selected auteurs with regularity, for example Akira Kurosawa received a full issue of *Kinema Junpō* devoted to his work in January 1963, and another on his collaboration with Toshiro Mifune in September 1964, while Yasujiro Ozu’s life and work was the subject of a special issue in February 1964.

Critical and journalistic coverage of the cinema was strongly auteurist in Japan in the years in which Imamura made his directorial debut and subsequent studio films. Like *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which printed critiques of auteur theory such as André Bazin’s ‘*De la politique des auteurs*’ (1957), individual writers were often reflexive about the auteurist claim that the director should be considered the sole author of a film text. Camera operators and producers were also invited to write articles or participate in round table discussions for publication in critical cinema journals. Yet the largest amount of coverage was devoted to film texts, stars, and directors, and

directors in particular were most regularly invited to write or comment on their own work and that of other filmmakers. Maureen Turim has argued for the importance of understanding the work of Nagisa Ōshima as ‘the product of a certain period of auteurism’s flowering,’ and at the same time ‘contemporaneous with, and arguably a part of, a deconstructive investigation of auteurism’ (1998: 15). The same could be said of Imamura, who shared Ōshima’s elite university background and working experiences, starting out as an assistant director at Shōchiku before leaving that studio, and later the studio system, to produce independent films.

Imamura was featured in the *Kinema Junpō* ‘Best Ten’ yearly edition of 1959, and by 1963 was included multiple times in a *Kinema Junpō* anthology on the top films of the past 18 years, which described *My Second Brother* as ‘full of energy’ (1963: 58). His photograph even made the cover of the 1967 *Kinema Junpō* anthology of world film directors, and was included in the ‘Dictionary of World Film Directors’ produced a month earlier by the same journal. Imamura’s entry emphasizes his interest in humanity (*ningen ni kyōmi o motsu*), and his ‘strong tendency to depend on the idiosyncrasies of a subject’ (*daizai no tokuisei ni tayoru*) (1967: 90). The dominant story of Imamura’s career focuses on his speedy ascent into the circle of revered film directors in Japan, and his own idiosyncratic outlook. What this chapter aims to problematize is the idea that this ascent was precipitated by a distinct change in the content of his work. Instead, I want to suggest that Imamura’s studio output laid the groundwork for an auteur persona and oeuvre of exactly the specifications desirable for critics and journalists in 1960s Japan.

After leaving Shōchiku to join Nikkatsu’s training program in 1954, Imamura’s first three films as director were released in quick succession throughout 1958. *Stolen Desire* was shown in roadshow Nikkatsu theatres from 20 May 1958,

and introduced in *Kinema Junpō* as the first effort of the ‘newly promoted’ director (1958: 93). Yet neither *Kinema Junpō* nor *Eiga Geijutsu* reviewed the film. In a later review for *Ginza Station*, *Eiga Geijutsu* critic Yūkichi Shinada described *Stolen Desire* as ‘having the attraction of showing a life full of vim and vigour’ (*ōseina seiketsuryō no miryoku*) (1958: 59). Yet Imamura debuted relatively quietly.

Ginza Station, released just a month later, was introduced in *Kinema Junpō* (1958: 101), but once again not reviewed. Shinada reviewed the film for *Eiga Geijutsu* (*Film Art*), but dismissed it as a mere ‘supplement’ (*soemono*) or knocked-together addendum (1958: 59). This kind of film was becoming more common in the late 1950s according to Shinada, as studios focused on producing material for double bills and providing opportunities for fresh talent to make their debut (1958: 59). As the number of films produced increases, Shinada argued, the quality will decrease in inverse proportion (*Genzai no seisaku kikō no naka de seisan honsū ga sōkasureba, seisaku jōken wa hanbireiteki ni waruku naru ni kimatte iru*) (1958: 59). Shinada’s association of increased production with decreased quality follows the auterist understanding, which seeks to restore the rarified aura of the artwork to the medium of cinema. However, his concerns have a particularly post-war flavor, as he worries that ‘impoverished Japan’ (*binbō kuni Nippon*) will not be able to make a good showing in the global cinema sphere with the kinds of films studios were churning out to fill double-feature programs (1958: 59). The first half of his one-page review of *Ginza Station* is therefore devoted to a public plea to the reader for support for his efforts to improve the quality of Japanese filmmaking.

The film itself is dismissed as a ‘vehicle for the popular title song’ (*ryūkōka no daimei*). Shinada even likens the final product to an unexpected ‘illegitimate child’ (*shoshi*) – ‘though the film company may have expected a legitimate offspring before

the birth, now they are burdened with this unexpected disaster' (1958: 59). He reports that no one is describing Imamura's direction or script as a great success, but nonetheless praises the second-time director for having endeavored to make an interesting (*omoshiroi*) film (1958: 59). Yet Shinada believes that the results are 'meager' (*sasayakana sakuhin*) when compared to *Stolen Desire*, and that *Ginza Station* only partially (*bubunteki*) reflects the energy of the earlier film (1958: 59).

Shinada's mixed review nevertheless contributes something to Imamura's budding auteur persona, as he describes the filmmaker as 'impudently taking an aggressive stance towards the bad conditions' of the film industry (*warui jōken no naka de zebutoku inaotte iru*) and showing 'a promising attitude towards filmmaking' (*seisaku taidō wa tanomoshii*) (1958: 59). Overall however, he found the film's 'biggest flaw' (*saidai no kekkan*) to be that it 'had no meaning' (*imi ga nai*) (1959: 58). Shinada's review reveals key criteria by which high-art film critics judged both film texts and film directors. Films without meaning are dismissed as light entertainment. However the persona of the director is treated as a relatively separate matter, and it is possible for a filmmaker to win praise in spite of a disappointing film if he is perceived to have stamped something of his own character on the text.

Endless Desire fared better with critics when it was released in November 1958, though once again Imamura's effort was introduced but not reviewed in *Kinema Junpō* (1958: 88). In *Eiga Geijutsu*, Heiichi Sugiyama compared the film to renowned auteur John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), which had been released in Japan as *Gold (Ōgon)* in May 1949. Comparing directors to one another as a means to analyse their auteur position is a classic *Cahiers du Cinéma* trope, as seen in the magazine's famous opposition of Mizoguchi to Kurosawa (Rivette 1958). Sugiyama argues that Imamura's film does not quite reach the level of Huston's, and contains

several unoriginal motifs. Neither the theme of a group slowly killing one another off nor the trope of murderous criminals chasing buried treasure is unusual (*mezurashikunai*), the former featuring in Huston's film and the latter in Minoru Shibuya's *Season of the Witch* (*Akujo no kisetsu*, 1958), released just a few months before. 'Nonetheless, Imamura's *Endless Desire* is fresh and interesting' (*shinsen de omoshiroi*) (Sugiyama 1959: 67), and Sugiyama argues that making audiences laugh at violent and criminal scenes is 'Director Imamura's precious talent' (*Imamura kantoku no kichōna sainō*) (Sugiyama 1959: 67). Imamura is credited with the power to draw the critic's interest (*Watashi wa taihen kanshinshita*) (1959: 67), and Sugiyama relates his sense that 'this new director's originality really has a good feeling' (*atarashii kantoku no orijinaritei wa, makoto ni kimochi ga yoi*) (1959: 67). He regrets that the film gradually collapses into a criminal action picture (*jidai ni hanzai katsugeki ni kanyū*), echoing Shinada's desire for Imamura to focus on human (*ningenrashisa*) issues in the future (Sugiyama 1959: 67; Shinada 1958: 59). In the end, he argues, 'the ending came to have an out of control feeling' (*te ni amatta to iu kanji ni natte shimatta*) (1959: 67).

Once again the critic's perception of Imamura's character colors his review of the film. Both Shinada and Sugiyama attribute key failings and successes of these first two films to an understanding of Imamura's character as mischievous and headstrong. His innovative technique produces a strong sense of originality; however storylines can become tiresome or disappointing. It's clear that critical assessment of Imamura is further shaped by his relatively junior status. Criticisms such as 'out of control' suggest a perception of the director as somehow immature, and critics focus on his future potential, emphasizing his recent promotion from assistant director.

Finally, in 1959 Imamura was credibly reviewed by *Kinema Junpō* for *My*

Second Brother, released on 28 October 1959. The film was introduced in *Kinema Junpō* (1959: 78) and given a short review (1959: 88-89), before winning third place in the yearly *Kinema Junpō* Best Ten competition. Fuyuhiko Kitagawa introduces Imamura as an ‘up and coming director’ (*shinei kantoku*), and praises the film’s ‘simple and accurate realism’ (*jimi de kokumeina riarizumu*) (1959: 88). The review is less than careful – Kitagawa freely admits he has neither read the original text on which the film was based nor seen Imamura’s earlier work. Yet he credits Imamura with guiding (*shidō*) the young actors to excellent performances, and praises his direct approach to difficult issues (1959: 88). He critiques the pacing of the ending however, stating a personal opinion that the penultimate scene should have been the last. Nonetheless, the review signalled that Imamura had made it into the elite circle of critically acclaimed Japanese directors.

Eiga Geijutsu had in many ways both intuited and contributed to Imamura’s recognition. As early as 1958, he had been invited to join a round table discussion with up-and-coming directors Kō Nakahira and Yasuzō Masumura, hosted by Masahiro Ogi, for a feature titled ‘Film is advancing!’ (*Eiga wa zenshinsuru!*) (1958: 33). Imamura is credited as ‘the director of *Stolen Desire*,’ though the magazine had yet to introduce or review the feature. The directors are invited to talk about ‘shouldering the burden of their generation’s culture’ (*sedai bunka no ninaite toshite kataru*), their pride in their work (*jibu*), their self-reflection (*hansei*), and their ambitions (*yashin*). However, for the first five pages Imamura is quiet, occasionally teased or chastised by Nakahira or Masumura, until he breaks forcefully into the discussion by calling the turn of the conversation ‘pretentious’ (*kiza*), claiming to be ‘irate’ (*iraira*) about the views the other directors express about writers (1958: 38), and reminding them that he also writes screenplays. Both Imamura and *Stolen Desire*

are featured in photo insets (1958: 39), but overall he says little until the final page of the round table discussion, where he launches into a critique of ‘mass communication phobia’ (*masu komi kyōfu*) (1958: 39). As an early introduction into the auteur’s spotlight, this could have gone better, compared to the impressive oratorical performances of directors like Nagisa Ōshima. Yet it lays the groundwork for the popular understanding of Imamura’s public persona as committed, bullish, and passionate in direct contrast to the quiet workmanlike persona of Ozu or the scholarly leftism of Kurosawa.

Every auteur persona is built on an origin story, and Imamura’s training and debut provided rich details for his. From his criticisms of Ozu’s working methods during his time at Shōchiku to his idolization of Yūzō Kawashima, and particularly his rebellious attitude towards the studio bosses (Desser 1988: 123), Imamura’s outspokenness formed the base of his forthright and passionate auteur persona. In accounts of his troubles with studio personnel (Tessier 1997: 59), Imamura is framed as an iconoclast and deep believer in the artistic value of cinema. This profile fit perfectly into the New Wave auteur mode. Yet Imamura’s auteur persona also had roots in his early work as well as his studio training.

Though *Stolen Desire* was based on a novel by Kon Tōkō, Imamura has claimed that protagonist Kunida, a young theatre director played by Hiroyuki Nagato, was modelled on himself (Desser 1988: 58; Kehr 1997: 71). In many ways this first film is a kind of self-introduction, confronting viewers and critics not only with Imamura’s particular visual and narrative style, but also with a number of themes and tropes relevant to the director’s own personal and political concerns, publicized later in many interviews and personal writings. Drawing from elements of his personal life and upbringing, Imamura firmly situates his own persona as an indelible element of

the film as a whole. The story focuses on a travelling theatre troupe and the difficult lives of the actors. Imamura's eldest brother was a stage actor in Tsukiji sho Gekijō (Tsukiji Little Theatre) in Tokyo and the family frequently visited the stage.

Furthermore, the narrative's love triangle between Kunida and the troupe leader's two daughters mirrors Imamura's own widely publicized romantic problems. Kunida and the younger daughter are eventually forced to leave the theatre troupe, and Imamura has similarly attributed his departure from Shōchiku to his romantic relationship with a company administrator, whom he later married (Kim 2003). The conflicting pull of work and duty versus romance and sex was to become a key theme in Imamura's work as well as in accounts of his personal life.

Establishing key thematic concerns

If *Stolen Desire* is Imamura's self-introduction, it is also the first example of a set of thematic concerns that form the backbone of every Imamura narrative thereafter. As many critics and writers have noted, Imamura's works are suffused with desire, and this first film is no exception. Nikkatsu studios insisted on the title, possibly due to several recent films with 'desire' in the title having done well at the domestic box office in 1957 (*Kinema Junpō* 1963: 138-158). Imamura preferred *Tent Theatre*, and in fact left this working title at the top left side of the title screen, in a small sign of the defiance that would become a central trope of his auteur persona. In the roundtable discussed above, he claims he had no interest in a title that would attract viewers, but only hoped for one which would have them 'watch with no expectations' (*kitai sarenai de mite morau*) (Imamura 1958: 39). Nonetheless, desire is the central theme of this first film. Kunida desires Chidori (Yōko Minamida), the eldest daughter of the troupe leader, and is desired in turn by Chigusa (Michie Kita), her younger

sister. This leads to the break-up of the troupe, when Kunida tries to persuade Chidori to leave her husband, and instead is cast out with Chigusa while the troupe moves on without them. Chidori's husband, Eizaburō (Shin'ichi Yanagisawa), is himself an object of desire, becoming a local idol for screaming female fans. These screams are balanced in turn with the yells of the male fans of the troupe's strip-tease dancers, who open every show.

Desire abounds, and Imamura focuses on its destructive and disruptive aspects rather than its generative potential, romantic or otherwise. As Dave Kehr observes, the groups at the heart of Imamura's films 'cannot contain the erotic energy of the individuals they hold together' (1997: 72). It is not only desire for romance or sex that endangers the structure of the groups that feature in Imamura's films however, but desire more generally. The problems in *Stolen Desire* really begin when an old friend attempts to lure Kunida away from his tent theatre troupe to work in television. Attracted by the money and opportunity, Kunida is swayed for a while, before deciding to remain with the troupe in a speech valorising the grass-roots efforts of the travelling actors in much the way Imamura himself, after tussling with the big business machine of Nikkatsu, began to vocally affirm his belief in the crafts of everyday people. David Desser has suggested that Kunida's 'increasing disillusionment with the theatre and its rules' is a metaphor for the alienation felt by young filmmakers of Imamura's generation (1988: 59). This alienation is one side of the desire for novelty and adventure that characterises Imamura's later career choices as well as the content of his future films.

The male fans of the strip-tease dancers are most clearly in pursuit of sexual satisfaction, tearing down the tent in which the dancers are changing. As the tent falls apart, the camera rests for a moment on a photograph of the popular actor Yūjirō

Ishihara. As Ishihara was the biggest star in the Nikkatsu stable, this could be a kind of product-placement, or Imamura's ironic send-up of Nikkatsu's sexualized commercialism.¹ The inclusion of the photograph may even be a little of both, fusing commercial concerns with a touch of defiant humour in a similar manner to Imamura's insistence on including his original title above the Nikkatsu-approved title he was forced to accept in the opening sequence. The photograph also appears to reference female desire, as the dancers have pinned up the picture of Ishihara to enjoy his celebrated sexualized appearance (Raine 2000). At the same time, it hints at the fame and fortune at the pinnacle of the actor's pursuit of success. Desires for fame, recognition, money, and celebrity are as much to blame for the troupe's rocky future as Kunida's messy romantic life.

In *Ginza Station*, desire for a woman working in the store across the street from his wife's pharmacy gets the protagonist into trouble. This light-hearted musical film is perhaps the first nod towards a theme Isolde Standish has identified across Imamura's later work, which examines the conflicting demands of the family structure 'on individuals living in the contemporary age of advanced capitalism' (2011: 81). Protagonist Jūtarō Ōyama (Shin'ichi Yanagisawa) is a 'henpecked' husband with a wife who controls every aspect of his physical being. His friend Asada (Kō Nishimura) advises him "as a medical professional" (*isha toshite*) to take a lover to cure his fantastical daydreaming. Asada's seduction advice amounts to taking a woman for meals and shopping trips, and at the end of their expensive capitalist montage, Jūtarō finds that his would-be lover has been hired by his wife to keep an eye on him while she is away. The nuclear family has never been in any real danger from the desires coursing through *Ginza Station*, and yet, at the same time, Asada's

¹ With thanks to David Desser for this suggestion.

duplicious view of the world and Jūtarō's island fantasies suggest that the middle-class urban family life depicted in the film is not quite stable either. The wife strives to present a Japanese version of a modern Americanized democratic capitalist-compliant family unit, complete with a thriving middle-class family business, two perfectly dressed children, and a husband forced to consume all the latest health potions and supplements with the goal of continual self-improvement. While this public presentation appears successful, Jūtarō and Asada's respective dreaming and scheming undermine the performance, continually presenting the possibility of disruption, whether planned or inadvertent. Critics picked up on the darker themes underlying the comic story, noting that while the coupling of a henpecked husband (*kyōsaika*) and a terrifying wife is 'common' (*afurete iru*), Jūtarō's daydreaming suggests something like shellshock from his participation in the recent war (*sensō boke*) (Shinada 1958: 59).

Imamura's concern with the darker aspects of desire, and the threat these pose to group structure, finds most explicit voice in *Endless Desire*. Crooked pharmacist Nakada (Kō Nishimura) worries aloud that the sexual desire all four male criminals express towards the female member of their gang will spell trouble. The gang have only five days to dig out a stash of morphine before the house above it is pulled down. Shima, the only woman, declares "I'll give myself to the one digging the hardest." As the others fight, Nakada, who has been Shima's secret lover for eight years, worries, "This woman could destroy the harmony of our team." In the end however, the desire of each gang member to keep the whole stash for themselves leads to them dying off one by one, until Shima dies alone on a bridge attempting to make off with the whole lot. Imamura's early films certainly show a fixation on desire, but a closer reading suggests that this desire can be other than sexual. In later films, such as the docu-

fiction *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen jōhatsu*, 1967), groups and alliances including the marital pair, a family of two sisters, and a film crew, are threatened not only by sexual desire, but also by the desire for fame exhibited by protagonist Yoshie Hayakawa. Before moving into documentary filming however, Imamura established his own group in these first three films, building a team of actors and filmmakers with whom he would continue to work into his later career.

Building a troupe

Hiroyuki Nagato, Yōko Minamida, Shin'ichi Yanagisawa, Kō Nishimura, and Shōichi Ōzawa, among many others, would continue to work with Imamura from these first three films throughout the rest of his oeuvre. Nagato and Minamida even married, forming a small family group within Imamura's wider group of filmmakers. *Endless Desire* was also Imamura's first film with Ensaku Himeda, the cinematographer he would work with for the next ten years. Imamura has connected his treatment of actors to his early experiences assisting Ozu, claiming the director's method of instructing actors was 'repugnant' to him. 'I don't have such blind faith in actors, I need to talk with them about family, education, etc. We talk about everyday life' (Imamura 1997: 148). From his first three Nikkatsu films, Imamura built a 'stable' of actors with whom he would work again and again (much like Ozu). The stars who appear regularly in Imamura's films also inform his popular auteur persona, creating an image of a director who remains committed to his troupe and runs his filmmaking practice in a manner similar to earlier traditions of stage-craft. That many of these actors were unknown, conventionally unattractive, or otherwise unusual in the post-war studio system further supports a reading of Imamura's popular persona as

iconoclastic and concerned with issues of an imagined authenticity rather than with superficial or business-friendly star qualities.

Even when working with actors outside his chosen group, particularly those visited on him by the studio, critics noted Imamura's skilful management of actors. Shinada praises his management of Hawaiian-Japanese star Frank Nagai in *Ginza Station*, arguing that he 'skilfully' (*kōmyō*) hides the weak points (*jakuten*) Nagai had previously displayed in leading roles in films such as *The 7:50 from Haneda* (*Haneda hatsu 7ji 50ppun*, Toshio Matsuda, 1958) (1958: 59). By drawing attention to the stronger attributes of a star popularly considered deficient in some respect, Imamura built a reputation as a director with a strong understanding of actors and the ability to get the best out of them. This trope is repeated in appreciations of his later work, such as *Intentions of Murder* (*Akai satsui*, 1964), in which he is said to have 'rehabilitated' the star persona of Sachiko Hidari, known as an outspoken and not particularly attractive actress who refused to submit to the studio system. Hidari later became the third female director in Japanese cinema history, appearing to channel some of Imamura's non-conformism into an unusual career move.

Finding a voice

As Max Tessier notes (1997: 46), many of Imamura's films feature non-standard Japanese dialect, particularly from the Kansai region. In these first three films, Imamura's characters repeatedly quiz one another on their backgrounds and draw attention to differences between the speaking and behavioural habits of different regions. As the criminals of *Endless Desire* arrive in a run-down town across the bank from Shiohama, an elderly man asks Shima where she is from, noting her accent. "Tokyo," she replies. He counters, "That's no place to live!" (*amari ii tokoro ja nai*).

Non-standard Japanese appears to be a means to express not only outsidership, but also the earthy qualities of the countryside and smaller towns of which Imamura often spoke. In fact the ‘earthiest’ characters, generally portrayed by older actors with strong non-standard speaking habits and dialect, are the last ones standing at the end of a typically destructive Imamura narrative. The old man who makes circuits of the neighbourhood in *Endless Desire* and the angry old woman who lends money to the characters of *My Second Brother* speak in strong dialects, and yet they are also given the roles of Greek chorus, providing commentary on the actions and beliefs of other characters.

Stolen Desire opens with a voice-over introduction set over an aerial view of Osaka, connecting the earthiness of the people with the area’s Edo-period history. The “dry humour” of the area is specifically connected to the “ancient districts” of Settsu and Kawachi, and the “indefatigable” (*takumashii*) nature of the inhabitants who are “unchanged to this day” (*ai mo kawarazu*). These same themes are repeated from *The Insect Woman* (*Nippon konchūki*, 1963) through to *Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama bushiko*, 1983), and feature in many interviews and writings by Imamura himself. *Ginza Station* takes the motifs of earthiness and non-standard language to extremes in dream sequences where Jūtarō inhabits a remote island with a woman named Sally who speaks in grunts and whoops. This island paradise is an explicit contrast to his clean modern workplace, and Sally to his hyper-articulate and very vocal wife. Critics noted that the ‘contrasting’ (*taihiteki*) ‘uninhibited’ (*honbō*) nature of the island scenes should be ‘enjoyable’ (*tanoshii*), but instead misfire (*fuhatsumi*) and fail to produce laughter, going ‘too far beyond life’s subtleties’ (*jinsei no kibi*) (Shinada 1958: 59). Frank Nagai sutures over the join with a repeated jazz interlude channelling both the perceived earthy qualities of the genre and its fashionable

reception in the Ginza area, in a narrative device Shinada described as ‘the only original point in the film’ (1958: 59). Though Imamura insists that featuring Nagai was the idea of Nikkatsu studio personnel, Shinada describes the directorial decision to make use of Nagai’s ‘comedic touch’ (*kigeki tacchi*) as ‘a wise strategy’ (*kenmeina sakusen*) (1958: 59). Here the critic’s insistence on the auteur’s originality and wisdom leads to attributing casting choices to Imamura in spite of the conflicting account provided by the director himself.

Imamura’s troubles with management and preference for earthy characters blended seamlessly into his account of his own class identification. Though Imamura was born in Tokyo to a middle-class physician’s family and attended elite schools before entering Waseda University, he was vocal about his dislike of the upper classes. From an early age, he remembered wanting to identify himself with ‘working-class people who were true to their own human natures’ (Imamura quoted in Nakata 1997: 117). As a strong dialect or accent is often associated with working-class areas and peoples in Japan, Imamura’s insistence on foregrounding different ways of speaking Japanese contributes to the crafting of his auteur persona as a director in touch with the working classes. Fellow directors recognized Imamura’s specialized interest in dialect. From his first roundtable discussion for *Eiga Geijutsu*, he was invited to speak as a dialect specialist. Kō Nakahira asked him ‘You know a lot about Osaka and Kansai people, right? Who has the most accurate Kawachi-ben?’ (1958: 40). Imamura demurred with an uncharacteristic, ‘Well, that’s a bit difficult...’ (*Ee, aa iu koto wa chotto...*) (1958: 40). That this first introduction to Imamura’s voice and personality focuses specifically on his interest in dialect suggests his affinity with outsidership, an impression strengthened by his shyness in the face of the more established Nakahira’s questioning.

Choosing a setting

As the repeated theme of non-standard dialect indicates, most of Imamura's films are set outside Tokyo and the major metropolitan hubs, focusing instead on marginal areas and themes of displacement and outsidership. Many of Imamura's settings are temporary, as in the ever-moving tent theatre of *Stolen Desire* or the village on the verge of re-location in *Endless Desire*. Protagonists are often further removed even from these marginal settings; the criminals of *Endless Desire* tunnel under the town to find a hidden stash of drugs, while Kunida spends much of his time on the roof or in the surrounding woods. Jūtarō of *Ginza Station* is physically located in the fashionable district around the train line, but spends much of his time imaginatively inhabiting a tropical island. While he returns to his 'real' life at the end of the film, reconciliation with his wife is brokered at a tropical theme park, where his boat washes up after a night of drifting in the bay. From the positive critical reception of *Endless Desire* onwards, film critics at the highbrow journals began to take Imamura's use of space seriously. Sugiyama suggested that the visual device of showing the criminals tunnelling under the inhabitants of the neighbourhood aptly depicted the divisions within human relations (*ningen kankei*) (1959: 67).

Though he was included alongside acclaimed directors in roundtables such as the one described above, Imamura has depicted himself as something of an outsider in his later writing and interviews. He has emphasized his disagreements with studio personnel and difference from critically acclaimed and studio-approved directors such as Ozu. This outsider persona demonstrates difference from both the studio system and mainstream Japanese society more generally, a position coherent with the recurring questioning and challenging of a perceived hegemonic version of Japanese

self-representation in many of Imamura's films. Of course, his move from Shōchiku to Nikkatsu in 1954, and his battles with Nikkatsu after 1961, as well as his decision to set up Imamura Productions in 1965 form a picture of Imamura as working outside or against the studio system. His move from feature film to documentary from 1967 is similarly iconoclastic, casting him outside the commercial sphere to an extent. Yet this was a period when several directors were following similar paths in many parts of the world, most significantly Ōshima, who left Shōchiku in 1960 to set up his own company. As the Japanese New Wave generated ever more varied filmmaking modes, Imamura's heavily manipulated docu-fiction *A Man Vanishes* also seemed less the work of a complete outsider than the extension of an existing movement towards new film forms. By setting his films on the outskirts of an imagined mainstream society in Japan, however, Imamura's auteur persona could be associated with outsidership even while he occupied a central place within critically acclaimed film history.

Recognition at last! *My Second Brother*

Like his 1958 films, *My Second Brother* features Imamura's common narrative theme of desire distorting the structure of a group. While the previous films' protagonists desired fame, romance, or sex however, the impoverished family at the heart of this fourth film desire only the financial security to live freely. Pursuit of these funds inevitably leads to the dissolution of the family, as the elder sister marries for a small dowry and moves away, and the elder brother goes to work in the major cities around the Kyushu area. Even the second brother of the title attempts to leave the coal-mining town in which the family have lived until their father's death. All of Imamura's key tropes are present in this fourth film: desire, a threatened group, non-standard Japanese speech, and a poor outsider location. Unlike the first three films,

which were either adapted from novels or written by Imamura himself however, this fourth film was adapted from the best-selling diaries of a young *zainichi* Korean girl named Sueko Yasumoto. Yasumoto's diaries were published (seemingly without her consent) in 1958 and became a media phenomenon as readers rushed to express their sympathy and horror at the impoverished lives of Korean-Japanese families during this era of rapidly increasing prosperity in the cities. *Kinema Junpō* introduced the film specifically as an adaptation of Yasumoto's diary (1959: 78), and reviewer Fuyuhiko Kitagawa praised the director for not deviating from the original story (1959: 88). Imamura's film clearly benefitted from the popularity of Yasumoto's story and the sympathetic feelings directed towards her family.

Like the previous three films, *My Second Brother* was commissioned by Nikkatsu studios. In this sense the film is similar to *Ginza Station*, which was conceived as a vehicle for popular singer-comedian Frank Nagai. Nikkatsu instructed Imamura to structure the film around Nagai singing the title song three times, and the pacing of the film narrative is consequently secondary to these scenes. *My Second Brother* also circumscribes Imamura's storytelling within an already-known element; however, in this case that element is the tragic story of the suffering Yasumoto family. The Yasumotos are the classic suffering subjects beloved of critics and audiences alike, and Imamura's depiction of their suffering is 'the kind of liberal indictment that Japanese critics laud' (Desser 1988: 59). Kitagawa argues for the universal importance of the film's themes, stressing the value of using cinema to depict 'how people get by every day in hard times' (1959: 89). In this sense, the affect Imamura is forced to borrow from the structuring device of Yasumoto's diary is closer to the humanistic concerns prized by many post-war Japanese film critics than the stylish cool of Nagai's star persona.

Furthermore, as James Quandt has observed, while *Stolen Desire* and *Endless Desire* 'are about classless people,' *My Second Brother* is about 'the proletariat' (1997: 18). Both the acting troupe of *Stolen Desire* and the criminals of *Endless Desire* have voluntarily opted out of mainstream society to pursue their own dreams. On the other hand, the Yasumotos and their neighbours have been rejected by society on the basis of their ethnic background and poverty in an ever-more vicious circle wherein one mode of suffering increases the other. When the second brother of the title goes to Tokyo to look for work, the people he encounters treat him like a strange animal. The mechanics in the bicycle shop where he applies for a job do not even attempt to explain to him that he is too young, instead going straight to the police. The Tokyo characters' bafflement at this young boy travelling alone to the capital to find work belies their conviction that Tokyo is civilization, and anything different therefore uncivilized. Their ridicule at the boy's expectations is undercut by the viewer's understanding that in the coal districts of Kyushu, an elementary school student working a physically taxing job to support his family is not unusual in this era. Imamura's fourth film not only depicts the Yasumotos' situation in a sympathetic manner, but also works to shame viewers about their own ignorance of the situation of working class and *zainichi* people, as the Tokyoites stand in for the audience. This kind of teaching function of popular cinema appealed to critics, who gave such educational humanist films as *Twenty Four Eyes* (*Nijūshi no hitomi*, Keisuke Kinoshita, 1954) unrestrained praise, and top prizes like the *Kinema Junpō* Best One award.

The making of an auteur

After establishing his critical reputation with *My Second Brother*, Imamura quickly returned to examining the strains that desire for sex, fame, and money place on group structures, in films such as *Pigs and Battleships*, *Intentions of Murder*, and *A Man Vanishes*. Following the critical and box office success of his fourth film, Imamura was frequently invited to write and interview for *Kinema Junpō* and *Eiga Geijutsu*, becoming part of a coterie of established auteurs who passed criticism and commentary on one another's work and place in the film industry, both in Japan and globally. I have argued here that Imamura's inclusion in this select group was not in spite of his first three studio films, but rather that those texts created and cemented an auteur persona that was absolutely of its time.

The kind of auteur persona the Japanese critical scene was ready to embrace was outlined in *Eiga Geijutsu* in critic Yūkichi Shinada's review of *Ginza Station*. The closing sentences read almost like advice to an aspiring auteur. Imamura's worries about pretentiousness are dismissed; Shinada has no problem with the use of 'pretentious' (*keren*) techniques such as time-lapse photography (1958: 59). Banality is a greater crime – Shinada complains about the romantic reconciliation of the couple in the conclusion, which he calls 'common as dog shit' (*gokuarifureta*) (1958: 59). Instead, Shinada recommends that Imamura's projects focus on the 'attractive' (*miryoku*) 'monster' (*kaibutsu*) characters like Kō Nakahira's, and avoid 'ordinary' (*heibon*) characters like Jūtarō. Shinada argues that Imamura's 'vivid' (*yakujo*) individual personality (*kosei*) should be boldly (*zubari*) displayed by making greater use of the wide screen format of Nikkatsuscope (1958: 59). In *Endless Desire*, Heiichi Sugiyama noted that Imamura used the full breadth of the wide screen admirably, sending characters onscreen from the right and left, and using the top and bottom of the screen space to increase visual interest (1959: 67). Imamura also appears to have

followed Shinada's recommendations in his post-1960 work which focused on monstrous personalities unleashing their desires on Japanese society. By presenting critics with exactly what they had asked for, Imamura became one of Japanese cinema's most lauded auteurs.

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