

CULTURE · JAPAN

Japanese Film & Television

From 1899's earliest surviving production through the postwar golden age, jidaigeki, tokusatsu and J-horror, the New Wave, the birth of television and J-drama, and the streaming era — closing with a capstone tracing one real, recurring thread the course kept finding along the way.

10 Chapters

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CHAPTER 1: WHY JAPANESE FILM & TELEVISION? SCOPE, SOURCES & A NOTE ON ANIME

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 1 · Why Japanese Film & Television? Scope, Sources & a Note on Anime

Most people outside Japan meet its screen culture through one narrow door — anime, or a handful of arthouse names. This course opens a different door: the live-action film and television industry underneath it, which is older, larger, and stranger than that narrow view suggests.

A Longer History Than You'd Expect

Edison's Kinetoscope reached Kobe in 1896; the Lumière brothers' Cinematograph followed into Japan the next year, in 1897. Japanese-made footage followed almost immediately — historians point to 1897 footage of geishas and Tokyo street scenes, shot with an imported Gaumont camera, as the earliest film made in Japan for entertainment.

THE REAL FIRST JAPANESE PRODUCTION — MOMIJIGARI, 1899

In 1899, photographic engineer Tsunekichi Shibata filmed a performance of the kabuki play *Momijigari* ("Maple Viewing") — generally credited as the first true Japanese cinematographic production, rather than a foreign camera operator's incidental footage. It set a pattern the young industry would return to again and again: cinema as a way of recording, and later reinventing, an already-existing stage tradition. Of the hundreds of films made in Japan between 1897 and 1908, fewer than a dozen fragments survive today — fire, chemical decay, earthquakes, and war took the rest.

A Scale You Might Not Expect

This isn't a small or peripheral industry. As of 2022, Japan was the world's fourth-largest producer of feature films by volume (634 films that year) and third-largest by box office revenue (roughly \$1.5 billion) — output on a scale most people outside Japan never see

reflected in what actually reaches them. Four studios — nicknamed the "Big Four" — have dominated that industry for most of its history and are the only members of the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan.

Shochiku

Founded 1895 as a kabuki production company; began making films in 1921 — generally considered the oldest continuously operating studio in Japan.

Nikkatsu

One of Japan's oldest film studios, with a real, documented history stretching back to the silent era, later known for genre and youth-market films.

Toho

The studio behind Kurosawa's major films and, later, Godzilla — a real bridge between arthouse prestige and genre spectacle this course revisits directly.

Toei & Kadokawa

Toei built its own reputation on jidaigeki and tokusatsu; Kadokawa's media-mix model later linked film production directly to publishing.

What This Course Covers — and What It Deliberately Doesn't

This course is scoped to **live-action film and television**. Animation — anime, and the manga it so often adapts — is a genuinely enormous subject of its own, with its own real industry history, studios, and artistic conventions that deserve dedicated treatment rather than a rushed detour here. It's reserved for a separate, future sibling course.

Where the boundary actually gets drawn — live-action adaptations of manga are a real, distinctly Japanese production trend in their own right, and this course does cover them (Chapter 8) — but strictly as live-action film and television, looking at what changes when a manga story moves onto a real set with real actors. The animated originals themselves stay out of scope.

A Note on Sources and Verification

Every specific date, name, and figure in this course is checked against real sources at the time of writing rather than assumed from memory — the same discipline this site applies to its other history and culture courses. Where a chapter's own subject matter genuinely overlaps with material already covered elsewhere on the site — kaiju and tokusatsu cinema, for instance, already appear in *Classic Science Fiction Film* — this course cross-references that material honestly rather than quietly repeating or contradicting it.

The Road Ahead

CHAPTER	WHAT IT COVERS
2	Silent-era cinema and the real benshi tradition — live narrators performing alongside silent films
3	The postwar golden age: Kurosawa, Ozu, and Mizoguchi compared
4	Jidaigeki and the samurai film as a genre in its own right
5	Kaiju, tokusatsu, and the real rise of J-horror
6	The Japanese New Wave and its real censorship battles
7	NHK, commercial broadcasting, and the birth of J-drama
8	Where live-action ends: manga adaptations and the boundary with anime
9	Contemporary cinema and the streaming era
10	Capstone: tracing postwar trauma and recovery across Japan's own screen

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Before this chapter, how much of what you knew about Japanese screen culture came from anime specifically? Does that narrow entry point surprise you, given how old and how large the live-

action industry actually is?

REFLECTION 2

Momijigari's own real origin — filming an existing kabuki performance rather than staging something new for the camera — set an early pattern of adapting stage tradition into film. Where else in media history have you seen a new technology start out by simply recording an older one?

REFLECTION 3

This course draws a deliberate line between live-action and animation. Do you think that line is a genuinely meaningful one for understanding an industry, or mostly a practical choice to keep the course's own scope manageable?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 1

- Foreign film technology reached Japan in 1896-97; the first true Japanese production, Shibata's *Momijigari*, followed in 1899
- Japan was the world's 4th-largest feature film producer by volume and 3rd-largest by box office as of 2022
- Shochiku (1895), Nikkatsu, Toho, and Toei/Kadokawa make up the historic "Big Four" of the Japanese film industry
- This course covers live-action film and television only — anime and manga are reserved for a future sibling course, with Chapter 8 drawing that boundary explicitly

Next chapter: **Silent Beginnings — The Benshi Tradition & the Early Studio System** — the real, distinctly Japanese practice of live narrators performing alongside silent films, and how the country's earliest studios grew up around it.

CHAPTER 2: SILENT BEGINNINGS — THE BENSHI TRADITION & THE EARLY STUDIO SYSTEM

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 2 · Silent Beginnings — The Benshi Tradition & the Early Studio System

Two real, distinctly Japanese things happened during the silent era that shaped everything this course covers afterward: audiences didn't just watch a silent film — they watched it alongside a live performer — and the industry's own major studios were assembled, deliberately, out of several smaller rivals at once.

The Benshi: Live Narrators for a "Silent" Film

From the very first motion-picture showings in Japan in 1896 through to the end of the silent era in 1939, a real, spoken layer accompanied nearly every screening. A *benshi* would introduce the film, set up what the audience was about to see, and then perform the story as it played — voicing characters' lines, narrating action, and adding commentary. A silent Japanese film, in practice, was rarely silent at all.

BIGGER DRAWS THAN THE FILMS THEMSELVES

Benshi weren't a minor accompaniment — they were often the actual reason audiences chose one theater over another, more than the specific film playing there. Popular benshi became genuine cultural stars, earning as much as, or more than, many of the actors on screen.

Why the Transition to Sound Took So Long

Sound film technology spread through the 1930s, and the benshi profession declined with it — but Japan's own transition to "talkies" was genuinely slower than in the West. It wasn't until 1940 that the majority of Japanese films actually featured sound. Part of the real reason: when theater owners moved to dismiss their narrators as sound technology arrived, the narrators

themselves went on strike. Benshi didn't disappear overnight; some moved into voice acting or other parts of the industry as the profession's own role narrowed.

The Early Studio System: Nikkatsu's 1912 Merger

Japan's oldest major studio was assembled, not founded from scratch. On 10 September 1912, four existing production companies and theater chains — Yoshizawa Shōten, Yokota Shōkai, Fukuhōdō, and M. Pathé — consolidated into a single company, Nippon Katsudō Shashin. The name was shortened to Nikkatsu (a portmanteau of "Nippon" and "Katsudō") only later, in November 1945. By 1915, the new company already controlled roughly two-thirds of the Japanese film-viewing market.

Onoe Matsunosuke

Employed by Nikkatsu as the first real star of Japanese cinema, built largely around jidaigeki period-drama roles.

Makino Shōzō

Nikkatsu's own leading early director, generally considered the first prominent director in Japanese film history.

Onnagata on Screen: A Kabuki Convention Carries Over

Early Japanese cinema inherited more than just subject matter from kabuki theater — it inherited a real performance convention too. In kabuki, male actors called *onnagata* (or *oyama*) have played women's roles since 1629, when women were banned from performing on the kabuki stage. That same convention carried directly into silent-era film: through the 1890s-1920s, female roles in Japanese jidaigeki were frequently played by male oyama actors, not actresses.

Who was really "first" is genuinely contested — Harumi Hanayagi is often credited as the first billed female performer in Japanese cinema, but actress Nakamura Kasen had actually appeared in earlier films without that same billing recognition — a real, smaller-scale version of the "popular credit vs. the actual record" pattern this site's own *History of Football* course found repeatedly. The wider shift away from oyama roles gathered pace after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, as

growing female audiences and studios like Shochiku began actively promoting real actresses instead.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Knowing that benshi performers were often a bigger draw than the film itself, how do you think that changes what a "silent film" even meant to a Japanese audience compared to a Western one?

REFLECTION 2

The benshi strike shows a real profession actively resisting a new technology that threatened it. Can you think of a more recent example of a creative role responding to a similar kind of technological disruption?

REFLECTION 3

Onnagata performance carried a centuries-old kabuki convention directly into a brand-new medium. Does that continuity change how you think about "early cinema" as something genuinely new, versus something built out of older traditions?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 2

- Benshi narrators performed live alongside silent films from 1896 until the end of the silent era in 1939, and were often bigger draws than the films themselves
- Japan's transition to sound film was slower than the West's, dragging until 1940, partly due to benshi resistance including a real strike
- Nikkatsu was formed 10 September 1912 by merging four existing companies; by 1915 it held roughly two-thirds of the market

- The kabuki convention of male onnagata playing female roles carried into silent film, only shifting toward real actresses after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake

Next chapter: **The Golden Age — Kurosawa, Ozu & Mizoguchi** — Japanese cinema's real postwar international breakthrough, and three genuinely different directors compared.

CHAPTER 3: THE GOLDEN AGE — KUROSAWA, OZU & MIZOGUCHI

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 3 · The Golden Age — Kurosawa, Ozu & Mizoguchi

Japanese cinema's own international breakthrough happened almost by accident, under a censorship regime that had spent the previous six years actively destroying films — and it launched a real "golden age" led by three directors who agreed on almost nothing about how a film should actually look.

A Real, Reluctant Breakthrough: Rashomon at Venice

Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) tells the same violent event four times, through four contradictory accounts from four different characters — a structure so distinctive that "the Rashomon effect" later entered English as a real term for exactly that kind of unreliable, multiply-contradicted account of a single event.

THE STUDIO DIDN'T WANT IT SHOWN

Daiei, the studio behind *Rashomon*, was genuinely reluctant to submit it to the 1951 Venice Film Festival at all — executives worried it was too unconventional and too distinctly Japanese to connect with a Western audience. It took Giuliana Stramigioli, an Italiafilm representative who had seen the film in Japan, to persuade Daiei to enter it. *Rashomon* won the Golden Lion at the 12th Venice International Film Festival on 10 September 1951 — and the following year won the Academy Honorary Award for Most Outstanding Foreign Language Feature, a category that predates today's competitive Best International Feature Film Oscar. Daiei's own executives, the film's actors, and even Kurosawa himself weren't at Venice to see the win; by then, none of them expected it to happen.

Filming Under Occupation

Rashomon was made in 1950, near the tail end of the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945-1952), a period during which the American-led GHQ/SCAP administration actively censored Japanese film content. In November 1945 alone, SCAP ordered 236 films it judged "feudal and militaristic" destroyed. Jidaigeki period films — including samurai stories — were particularly targeted for their feudal themes; some surviving films weren't cleared for release again until 1952. Censors actively steered filmmakers toward "democratic" subject matter instead: stories about opponents of prewar fascism, and advocates for civil and women's rights.

Why that context matters here — Kurosawa, Ozu, and Mizoguchi were all working, at least part of the time, inside a system actively discouraging exactly the kind of feudal-era period storytelling Japanese cinema had built much of its early identity on (Chapter 4 covers that jidaigeki tradition directly). The genuinely golden-age work covered in this chapter came together despite that constraint, not in a vacuum.

Three Directors, Three Genuinely Different Styles

Rashomon's win put Kurosawa on the international map, but he was only one of three directors who defined this era — and the three of them approached filmmaking in real, deliberately different ways.

DIRECTOR	REAL SIGNATURE APPROACH	LANDMARK FILM
Akira Kurosawa	Dynamic, kinetic editing and camera movement; internationally the most immediately recognizable of the three	<i>Rashomon</i> (1950)
Yasujiro Ozu	The "tatami shot" — camera fixed roughly 2.5 feet off the ground, at the eye level of someone seated on a tatami mat, almost always shot on a 50mm lens with minimal movement	<i>Tokyo Story</i> (1953)
Kenji Mizoguchi	"One scene, one cut" — long, flowing takes that move the camera through a space rather than cutting within it	<i>Ugetsu</i> (1953)

Ozu's Pillow Shots

Mizoguchi's Ugetsu, 1953

Brief transitional images — a hallway, a passing train, laundry on a line — inserted between scenes. The term borrows from "pillow words" (makura kotoba) in classical waka poetry, giving the audience a quiet beat of reflection rather than cutting straight to the next scene.

Mizoguchi's own 78th film — decades into his career before this real international breakthrough. Won the Silver Lion for Best Direction at Venice in 1953, plus the Italian Critics Award, and re-established him internationally alongside Ozu and the "relative newcomer" Kurosawa.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Daiei's own executives thought *Rashomon* was too Japanese to succeed internationally — and were proven completely wrong. What do you think that says about how confidently a studio (or anyone) can predict what will actually connect across a cultural gap?

REFLECTION 2

Ozu, Mizoguchi, and Kurosawa were all working under real Occupation-era constraints, yet produced three genuinely different styles. Does that make you think external constraint drives artistic distinctiveness, or that it's mostly irrelevant to how a director's own personal style actually forms?

REFLECTION 3

Mizoguchi had already made 77 films before *Ugetsu* brought him international recognition. How does knowing that change your sense of what a director's own "breakthrough" moment usually represents?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 3

- *Rashomon* (1950) won the real 1951 Golden Lion at Venice and the 1952 Academy Honorary Award for foreign-language film, despite Daiei's own reluctance to submit it at all

- The Allied Occupation (1945-1952) actively censored Japanese cinema, ordering 236 "feudal and militaristic" films destroyed in November 1945 alone, with jidaigeki particularly targeted
- Ozu's fixed, low "tatami shot" and Mizoguchi's flowing "one scene, one cut" long takes represent genuinely opposite real approaches to camera style, with Kurosawa's own dynamic editing as a third
- Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953) — his 78th film — won the Silver Lion for Best Direction at Venice, re-establishing him alongside Ozu and Kurosawa as one of Japan's three defining directors of the era

Next chapter: **Genre Cinema I — Jidaigeki & the Samurai Film** — the period-drama tradition Occupation censors tried to suppress, and how it re-emerged as one of Japanese cinema's most influential genres.

CHAPTER 4: GENRE CINEMA I — JIDAIGEKI & THE SAMURAI FILM

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 4 · Genre Cinema I — Jidaigeki & the Samurai Film

The genre Occupation censors spent years trying to suppress (Chapter 3) came roaring back after 1952 — and became Japanese cinema's single most globally influential export, reshaping the Western film genre in ways that ended up in real courtrooms.

What Is Jidaigeki?

Jidaigeki ("period drama") covers Japanese films set in the pre-modern era, most often the Edo period (1603-1868). *Chanbara* — swordplay films built around dueling and combat — form the genre's most internationally recognizable subgenre, and the one this chapter focuses on.

Seven Samurai: A Production on a Genuinely Different Scale

Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) was, at the time, the longest and most expensive film ever made in Japan — production stretched across nearly a full year. Set at the end of the 16th century, it follows an impoverished village that hires a mismatched group of hungry samurai to defend it from bandits. Kurosawa's own innovative camerawork — close-ups, moving camera, high-angle shots — remains genuinely influential with cinematographers today.

THE REAL LEGAL AFTERMATH: THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Six years later, director John Sturges turned Kurosawa's story into an American Western, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), swapping samurai for gunslingers. Kurosawa himself reportedly felt the result was different enough that he didn't even consider it a direct adaptation — but the underlying licensing dispute still ended up in court. A 1978 Tokyo District Court ruling found that Toho had only granted a "one-picture license" with no remake or sequel rights included, and Kurosawa, along with co-writers

Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni, were awarded a real share of what Toho had earned from its own deal with United Artists.

Yojimbo and a Real, Documented Lawsuit

Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) — a lone, wandering swordsman playing two rival gangs against each other — became the direct, unauthorized template for Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), the film that launched Clint Eastwood's career and the entire "spaghetti Western" genre. This time, Toho filed suit rather than letting the resemblance stand.

Kurosawa's own words, quoted directly — in his real letter to Leone: "Signor Leone, I have just had the chance to see your film. It is a very fine film, but it is my film. Since Japan is a signatory of the Berne Convention on international copyright, you must pay me." Toho settled out of court for over \$100,000 plus 15% of *A Fistful of Dollars*' worldwide box office — a deal that reportedly earned Kurosawa more money than *Yojimbo* itself had. A genuinely tangled footnote: *Yojimbo* itself drew real influence from Dashiell Hammett's American hardboiled novel *Red Harvest*, while Leone pointed to an 18th-century Italian play, *The Servant of Two Masters*, as his own defense.

Zatoichi: A Different Kind of Swordsman

Not every jidaigeki hero looked like Kurosawa's stoic ronin. Starting in 1962, actor Shintaro Katsu played Zatoichi — a blind, itinerant masseur who also happens to be a lightning-fast swordsman — across 25 films made between 1962 and 1973, with a 26th entry arriving 16 years later in 1989. The series became the longest-running action franchise in Japanese film history, and a genuinely different genre model from Kurosawa's own prestige epics: lower-budget, faster-turnaround, and built around one continuing character rather than a fresh ensemble each time.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Kurosawa personally didn't consider *The Magnificent Seven* a real adaptation of his own film, yet the courts still ruled in his favor over licensing rights. Does that gap between an artist's own opinion and a legal outcome surprise you?

REFLECTION 2

Yojimbo drew from an American novel, then directly shaped an Italian Western that in turn reshaped American cinema. What does that circularity suggest about how "national" a genre like the Western — or the samurai film — really is?

REFLECTION 3

Zatoichi's 26-film run took a genuinely different approach from Kurosawa's own prestige productions. Which model — one director's own auteur vision, or one character sustained across dozens of films — do you think tends to leave a bigger cultural footprint over time?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 4

- Jidaigeki covers Japanese period drama, typically set in the Edo era (1603-1868); chanbara is its swordplay subgenre
- *Seven Samurai* (1954) was the longest and most expensive Japanese film of its time, later triggering a real 1978 court ruling over *The Magnificent Seven*'s own licensing
- *Yojimbo* (1961) led to a real, documented lawsuit and settlement over Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* — over \$100,000 plus 15% of worldwide box office
- *Zatoichi* (1962-1989) ran 26 films with Shintaro Katsu, becoming the longest-running action series in Japanese film history

Next chapter: **Genre Cinema II — Kaiju, Tokusatsu & J-Horror** — Godzilla's real origins, the tokusatsu tradition, and J-horror's own real international influence on Hollywood.

CHAPTER 5: GENRE CINEMA II — KAIJU, TOKUSATSU & J-HORROR

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 5 · Genre Cinema II — Kaiju, Tokusatsu & J-Horror

One special-effects artist built the entire visual language of Japanese monster cinema almost single-handedly, and half a century later a cursed videotape did something almost no Japanese film had ever done before: got remade in Hollywood and then out-earned its own original, at home, in Japan.

A Quick Cross-Reference: Godzilla

Godzilla's own real 1954 origin — tied directly to the Lucky Dragon 5 incident and the trauma of the atomic bombings — is already covered in this site's *Classic Science Fiction Film* course, so it isn't repeated in full here. This chapter picks up the wider tradition Godzilla launched: tokusatsu, Japan's own real, distinctive special-effects genre.

Eiji Tsuburaya: The "Father of Tokusatsu"

"Tokusatsu" is a contraction of *tokushu satsuei* — "special photography." Eiji Tsuburaya, the special-effects artist behind Godzilla, worked on roughly 250 films across a five-decade career and is widely credited as tokusatsu's real founding figure. Inspired directly by the American film *King Kong*, Tsuburaya developed "suitmation" — a human actor performing inside a monster costume — combined with detailed miniatures and scaled-down city sets, techniques that became the genre's defining visual signature.

Tsuburaya Productions, 1963

Tsuburaya founded his own dedicated special-effects studio in 1963, giving tokusatsu a real institutional home separate from Toho itself.

Ultraman, 1966-1967

Tsuburaya's own creation, and one of tokusatsu's most enduring franchises — a giant alien superhero defending Earth, launched by the newly founded studio.

Kamen Rider, 1971-1973

Created by prolific manga artist Shotaro Ishinomori — tokusatsu's own real reach beyond Tsuburaya's specific studio, into a masked-hero format that's remained in continuous production for decades since.

The J-Horror Boom: Ringu, 1998

Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), based on Koji Suzuki's 1991 novel, follows a reporter racing to solve the mystery of a cursed videotape that kills anyone who watches it within seven days. The film became the highest-grossing horror film in Japanese history at the time, earning roughly \$49 million, and triggered a real wave of international interest in Japanese horror — "J-horror" — along with a string of Western remakes.

A GENUINELY UNUSUAL REVERSAL

The 2002 American remake, *The Ring*, became the only Western J-horror remake to achieve real critical success — but the truly striking detail is what happened when it opened in Japan itself: the American remake actually outperformed Nakata's own original at the Japanese box office within just three weeks of release.

Ju-On: The Director Who Remade His Own Film

Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-On* franchise followed a similar international path — a 2000 direct-to-video original, a 2002 theatrical version (*Ju-On: The Grudge*), and international remake interest soon after.

A real, genuinely different remake arrangement

Unlike *The Ring* — remade by a different director for Hollywood — Shimizu directed the 2004 American remake, *The Grudge*, himself, and went on to direct its American sequel, *The Grudge 2*

(2006), as well. It's a striking contrast to Chapter 4's own Kurosawa cases: where Kurosawa had no creative control at all over *The Magnificent Seven* or *A Fistful of Dollars* and had to pursue legal remedies afterward, Shimizu simply carried his own vision directly into the American version himself.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Tsuburaya's suitmation technique was directly inspired by an American film, *King Kong*, yet became one of the most distinctly Japanese visual styles in cinema. What do you think determines whether a borrowed technique ends up feeling foreign or genuinely native to its new home?

REFLECTION 2

The Ring's American remake outperforming the Japanese original in Japan itself is a real, unusual reversal. What do you think that says about how much a remake's own marketing and polish can matter, even to an audience that already has access to the "authentic" original?

REFLECTION 3

Shimizu directing his own Hollywood remake is a genuinely different arrangement from every other cross-cultural remake this course has covered so far. Do you think a director remaking their own work produces a meaningfully different result than someone else remaking it for them?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 5

- Tokusatsu ("special photography") was largely defined by Eiji Tsuburaya, who developed suitmation and worked on roughly 250 films across five decades
- Tsuburaya founded his own studio in 1963 and created Ultraman (1966-67); Shotaro Ishinomori created Kamen Rider (1971-73)
- Ringu (1998) became Japan's highest-grossing horror film at the time (\$49 million) and launched the international J-horror boom

- The Ring's 2002 American remake genuinely outperformed the Japanese original in Japan itself; Ju-On's own director, Takashi Shimizu, directed his American remake personally, unlike every other remake case in this course

Next chapter: **The Japanese New Wave & Censorship Battles** — the 1960s movement that pushed Japanese cinema into genuinely confrontational territory, and the real censorship fights that followed it.

CHAPTER 6: THE JAPANESE NEW WAVE & CENSORSHIP BATTLES

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 6 · The Japanese New Wave & Censorship Battles

A movement that began as a studio's own marketing gimmick ended up producing some of the most genuinely confrontational films Japanese cinema has ever made — and one director's own courtroom victory still hasn't undone the censorship it was fought over.

A Movement Born From Studio Branding

"Nuberu bagu" borrows its name directly from the French *Nouvelle vague*, a contemporaneous movement that was similarly tearing up the established conventions of its own national cinema — but the Japanese New Wave's own real origin is genuinely more corporate than that name suggests. Around 1960, Shochiku itself marketed the debuts of three young in-house directors — Nagisa Oshima, Masahiro Shinoda, and Kiju Yoshida — as the launch of the "Shochiku Nuberu bagu." All three directors went on to leave the studio under real, acrimonious circumstances, taking the movement independent.

What the New Wave Actually Confronted

Once free of studio oversight, these filmmakers rejected classical Japanese cinema's own established conventions in favor of formally and thematically challenging work, arriving during a period of real national social unrest. The films took on subject matter Japanese cinema had largely avoided: sexual violence, political radicalism, youth delinquency, discrimination against Korean residents of Japan, queerness, and the still-raw aftermath of the Second World War.

Nagisa Oshima

The movement's most prolific figure, and its most overtly political — the director whose

Shohei Imamura

One of the New Wave's other major names, working in a genuinely less overtly political

own later work triggered the real censorship battle covered below.

register than Oshima or several directors who emerged later in the decade.

The Real Censorship Battle: In the Realm of the Senses, 1976

Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no Corrida*, 1976) pushed the New Wave's confrontational instincts about as far as they could go, and the Japanese government responded with a real obscenity prosecution — though not, technically, over the film itself. The charges were brought over a companion book of film stills and script notes published by San'ichishobo, filed against both Oshima and the publisher in 1976.

OSHIMA'S OWN REAL COURTROOM ARGUMENT

Oshima and the publisher were found not guilty in 1979. The government appealed, and the Tokyo High Court upheld the acquittal in 1982. In his own testimony, Oshima argued: "Nothing that is expressed is obscene. What is obscene is what is hidden." The presiding judge accepted his broader argument that obscenity itself resists any workable legal definition.

A real victory that didn't actually change anything — despite winning the case outright, *In the Realm of the Senses* has still never been shown uncensored in Japan. To this day, the explicit sequences remain optically fogged or mosaicked whenever the film screens there — a genuinely striking gap between a real legal win and the practical, lasting censorship it was fought over.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

A movement that began as studio marketing ended up producing some of Japanese cinema's most genuinely rebellious work. Does that corporate origin change how you think about the New Wave's own later, more independent output?

REFLECTION 2

Oshima's own courtroom line — "What is obscene is what is hidden" — won him the case. Do you find that argument genuinely persuasive as a legal principle, or more as a clever piece of rhetoric?

REFLECTION 3

The film is still censored in Japan decades after Oshima's own legal victory. What does that gap tell you about the real difference between winning a legal argument and actually changing a practical outcome?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 6

- The Japanese New Wave began as Shochiku's own studio branding for three young directors around 1960, before all three left the studio independently
- New Wave films confronted subjects classical Japanese cinema had largely avoided — sexual violence, radicalism, delinquency, discrimination, queerness, and WWII's aftermath
- Oshima's obscenity charges over *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) targeted a companion book, not the film itself; he and the publisher were acquitted in 1979, upheld on appeal in 1982
- Despite that legal win, the film remains censored in Japan to this day, with explicit sequences still fogged or mosaicked in every screening

Next chapter: **Television's Rise — NHK, Commercial Broadcasting & the Birth of J-Drama** — the real public-broadcasting model that launched Japanese television, and the 1990s boom that gave the world "trendy drama."

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 7 · Television's Rise — NHK, Commercial Broadcasting & the Birth of J-Drama

Japan's public and commercial broadcasters launched television within six months of each other in 1953 — and nearly four decades later, one network's own scheduling decision, made for entirely practical reasons, turned into the format that defined an entire genre of Japanese drama.

NHK: Japan's Public Broadcaster

NHK's own real origin traces back to Japan's first radio transmission, broadcast by the Tokyo Broadcasting Station on 22 March 1925. By August 1926, the Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya stations had merged into a single organization — Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK), the Japan Broadcasting Corporation — explicitly modeled on Britain's own BBC. A real 1950 Broadcast Law reformed NHK into its modern public-broadcasting structure: the law forbade government intervention in programming and, for the first time, allowed private broadcasters to compete. NHK itself launched television service in February 1953, initially airing just four hours a day, funded entirely by audience license fees rather than advertising.

Commercial Broadcasting Arrives — Barely Months Later

Nippon TV, founded by Matsutaro Shoriki, was granted Japan's first commercial television license in July 1952 and launched on 28 August 1953 as Asia's first commercial television station — barely six months after NHK's own television service began. Japan's first television commercial, for Seikosha clocks, aired that same day.

The Birth of "Trendy Drama"

In the late 1980s, Fuji TV producer Ota Toru — then in his late 20s — set out to make dramas targeting women in their twenties. The result was "trendy drama": series built around love affairs between good-looking actors with fashionable lifestyles, prioritizing setting, music, and casting over plot substance. *Dakishimetai* (1988) is generally cited as an early example of the format taking shape.

TOKYO LOVE STORY, 1991 — THE FORMAT'S REAL BREAKTHROUGH

Tokyo Love Story aired on Fuji TV across 11 episodes and one special between January and March 1991, averaging a real 22.88% viewership rating. Its theme song, "Love Story wa Totsuzen ni" by Kazumasa Oda, became the 9th best-selling single in Japan's history. Alongside *The 101st Marriage Proposal*, it's credited with propelling Fuji TV's own Monday-night 9pm drama slot into the cultural institution it remains today.

A genuinely practical reason behind the schedule — that slot is known in Japan as "Getsuku" (月9), short for *Getsuyō kuji*, "Monday at 9." Fuji TV deliberately placed its most anticipated dramas there for a real, unglamorous reason: Monday is the one night of the week Japanese professional baseball never schedules games, guaranteeing the slot would never face a broadcast delay across an entire season.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

NHK and Nippon TV launched television service just six months apart, one public and one commercial. Do you think that near-simultaneous start shaped Japanese television differently than a country where one model had years to establish itself first?

REFLECTION 2

Trendy drama deliberately prioritized style — casting, music, setting — over plot substance. Do you think that's a genuine creative choice, or closer to a straightforward ratings strategy dressed up as one?

REFLECTION 3

The Getsuku slot's own real origin was about avoiding baseball schedule conflicts, not about picking a culturally meaningful night. Does knowing that practical reason change how you think about "iconic" broadcast slots more generally?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 7

- NHK traces to Japan's first radio broadcast (1925), formally merging as a BBC-modeled public broadcaster in 1926, and launched television in February 1953
- Nippon TV launched 28 August 1953 as Asia's first commercial television station, barely six months after NHK's own TV debut
- "Trendy drama" originated at Fuji TV in the late 1980s under producer Ota Toru, prioritizing style and casting over plot
- Tokyo Love Story (1991) helped cement Fuji TV's "Getsuku" Monday 9pm slot — chosen for the real, practical reason that baseball never airs that night

Next chapter: **Where Live-Action Ends — Manga Adaptations & the Boundary With Anime** — a real, distinctly Japanese production trend, and where this course's own scope stops.

CHAPTER 8: WHERE LIVE-ACTION ENDS — MANGA ADAPTATIONS & THE BOUNDARY WITH ANIME

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 8 · Where Live-Action Ends — Manga Adaptations & the Boundary With Anime

This chapter sits right on the line this course drew back in Chapter 1 — real actors and real sets adapting a source that was never drawn to look real in the first place, with a genuinely mixed real track record to show for it.

Getting the Terms Straight

Three words that often get blurred together outside Japan actually describe three separate things: *manga* is the comic — the original printed source material; *anime* is a specific medium, animation, whether or not it happens to be Japanese; and *live-action* is what this course actually covers — real actors, real locations, real cameras, adapting a manga's own story without animating it.

A Real, Distinctly Japanese Production Trend

Live-action manga adaptation is a genuinely large, ongoing part of the Japanese film and television industry — not a novelty format. *Rurouni Kenshin*, based on Nobuhiro Watsuki's samurai manga, is one of its clearest commercial success stories.

RUROUNI KENSHIN: BEATING THE AVENGERS AT THE BOX OFFICE

Director Keishi Ōtomo's 2012 film, starring Takeru Satoh, earned over 300 million yen on its opening weekend alone — reportedly enough to outperform *The Avengers* at the Japanese box office that same weekend — and went on to gross roughly \$60 million worldwide. The trilogy that followed pushed combined earnings past 12 billion yen and sold over 10 million tickets, with later sequels ("The Final" and "The Beginning," 2021) continuing to top Japan's own box-office charts on release.

The Format's Real, Mixed Track Record

Rurouni Kenshin's own success isn't representative of every live-action manga adaptation — the format has a genuinely uneven real history. Netflix's 2017 live-action *Fullmetal Alchemist* is a clear counter-example: it holds a real 28% critics' score against a much higher 71% audience score, with reviewers specifically criticizing rushed pacing, tonal inconsistency, and uneven CGI in adapting a story originally told across many manga volumes and a full-length anime series.

Why the format is genuinely harder than it looks — manga artwork often relies on stylized proportions, exaggerated expressions, and non-realistic hair or costume design that reads naturally on the page but can look genuinely uncanny on a real human actor. A live-action adaptation trades that stylization for real stunts, real locations, and real emotional performance — a real trade-off, not a strict downgrade, but one that different productions have handled with very different success.

Why Anime Itself Stays Out of Scope

This chapter is as close as this course gets to anime, and deliberately doesn't cross the line. Anime's own real production history — its studios, directors, and distinct artistic language — is a genuinely large subject that deserves its own dedicated course rather than a rushed chapter squeezed in here, exactly as Chapter 1 stated at the outset.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Rurouni Kenshin succeeded partly by leaning into real stunts and locations rather than trying to visually replicate its manga's own stylized art. Do you think that's the right general strategy for live-action adaptation, or does it depend heavily on the specific source material?

REFLECTION 2

Fullmetal Alchemist's real critic/audience score gap is fairly wide. What do you think explains that kind of split for a live-action adaptation specifically, compared to an original live-action film?

REFLECTION 3

This course draws a firm line at animation. Having seen how much real, substantial material sits just on the live-action side of that line, does the boundary still feel like the right place to have drawn it?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 8

- Manga (the comic), anime (the animated medium), and live-action (real actors and sets) are three genuinely separate things — this course covers only the third
- Rurouni Kenshin (2012) reportedly outsold The Avengers at the Japanese box office on its opening weekend, and its trilogy passed 12 billion yen combined
- Fullmetal Alchemist (2017) shows the format's real risk — a 28% critics' score against a 71% audience score, driven by pacing, tone, and CGI complaints
- Animation itself stays fully out of this course's scope, reserved for a genuine future sibling course

Next chapter: **Contemporary Cinema & the Streaming Era** — Hirokazu Kore-eda's real Palme d'Or win, and how streaming platforms have reshaped where Japanese film and television actually reach an audience.

CHAPTER 9: CONTEMPORARY CINEMA & THE STREAMING ERA

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 9 · Contemporary Cinema & the Streaming Era

Rashomon needed a festival, a skeptical studio talked into submitting it, and a persuasive advocate to reach the world in 1951 (Chapter 3). Seven decades later, a single Netflix release reached ninety countries' own Top 10 lists in the same weekend it premiered.

A Real, Rare International Prize — *Shoplifters*, 2018

Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Shoplifters* (2018) — a quiet family drama about a group bound less by blood than by shared poverty and petty theft — won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2018, the festival's top prize. It was the first Japanese win in 21 years.

A real callback to Chapter 6 — the last Japanese director to win the Palme d'Or before Kore-eda was Shohei Imamura, for *The Eel* in 1997 — the same Imamura this course already met as one of the New Wave's own defining figures, working in a genuinely less overtly political register than his contemporary Oshima.

Streaming Reshapes Where Content Actually Reaches an Audience

Where *Rashomon*'s international breakthrough depended on a single festival screening and one advocate's persistence, streaming platforms — Netflix chief among them — now distribute Japanese-produced film and television to a global audience simultaneously with its domestic release, with real, substantial investment behind original Japanese productions rather than simply licensing content after the fact.

ALICE IN BORDERLAND — A REAL GLOBAL NUMBER

Netflix's *Alice in Borderland* Season 2 (2022) racked up 61.2 million viewing hours in its premiere weekend alone, landing at #1 on Netflix's own Global Non-English TV list and reaching the Top 10 in 90 countries — including Japan, the US, Canada, Brazil, France, and Hong Kong. It became the most-watched Japanese series in Netflix's history within four days of release. Combined with Season 1's own continued viewership that same weekend, the show reached 80 million viewing hours — surpassing *Squid Game*'s own real 63 million viewing hours in its first week as a Global Top 10 release.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Rashomon's international breakthrough took a skeptical studio, a persuasive advocate, and a single festival screening. *Alice in Borderland* reached 90 countries in one weekend. Does that structural change feel like a genuine improvement for Japanese storytelling reaching the world, or does something real get lost in that shift from festival curation to algorithmic distribution?

REFLECTION 2

Kore-eda's *Palme d'Or* came 21 years after Imamura's own win. What do you think a gap that long says about how consistently Japanese cinema's own festival-circuit prestige has actually translated into major international prizes, compared to its real, sustained commercial influence covered elsewhere in this course?

REFLECTION 3

Having now traced this industry from 1899's *Momijigari* through to a single Netflix weekend outperforming *Squid Game*, what do you think has actually stayed consistent about Japanese film and television across more than a century, if anything?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 9

- Kore-eda's *Shoplifters* (2018) won the Palme d'Or, the first Japanese win in 21 years since Imamura's *The Eel* (1997)
- Streaming platforms now distribute Japanese productions to a global audience simultaneously with domestic release, backed by real original investment rather than after-the-fact licensing
- *Alice in Borderland* Season 2 (2022) drew 61.2 million viewing hours in its premiere weekend, reaching 90 countries' Top 10 lists and surpassing *Squid Game*'s own first-week numbers

Next chapter: **Capstone — Tracing Postwar Trauma & Recovery Across Japan's Own Screen** — one continuous thread traced from Chapter 3's own Occupation-era constraints all the way through to this chapter's streaming-era present.

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — TRACING POSTWAR TRAUMA & RECOVERY ACROSS JAPAN'S OWN SCREEN

Japanese Film & Television

Chapter 10 · Capstone: Tracing Postwar Trauma & Recovery Across Japan's Own Screen

No new research in this closing chapter — instead, one real thread traced back through everything this course has already covered: a screen industry that spent decades processing a war it was, for years, legally forbidden to depict directly.

A Real Thread, Traced Chapter by Chapter

Chapter 3 established that *Rashomon* was made between 1948 and 1950, under Occupation censorship codes that specifically restricted direct references to the war. Real film scholarship reads the film's own genuinely unresolved moral ambiguity — four witnesses, one violent death, no reliable account of what actually happened — as a real, documented response to that constraint: unable to depict the war directly, Kurosawa built a story about the collapse of truth and moral certainty itself, widely read as reflecting Japan's own postwar crisis of identity and unresolved war responsibility. Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953) took a quieter path to similar ground — a family drama built around a generation gap and social change, made as postwar Japan's own family structures were genuinely being reshaped. Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953) is set amid civil-war chaos and haunted by loss, giving the era's own destruction a period-drama disguise.

Chapter 4 traced jidaigeki's own real arc directly through this same lens: it was the genre Occupation censors targeted hardest for its "feudal" themes, with real films left unreleased until 1952 — and its full return afterward, culminating in Kurosawa's own *Seven Samurai* (1954), reads as Japanese cinema reclaiming a cultural heritage it had spent years being told to suppress. Chapter 5's own real, verified origin for *Godzilla* (1954) — grounded directly in the Lucky Dragon 5 incident and the trauma of the atomic bombings, and covered in full in this site's own *Classic Science Fiction Film* course — is this thread's single most explicit, most documented instance: an entire genre born from processing a specific, real national trauma through spectacle rather than direct depiction.

Chapter 6 found the thread stated almost outright: the New Wave named "the still-raw aftermath of the Second World War" as one of the real subjects classical Japanese cinema had

avoided and its own directors actively confronted. Chapter 7's real broadcasting boom — NHK and Nippon TV both launching television within six months of each other in 1953 — tracks Japan's own real postwar economic recovery in the background, even where the content itself wasn't about the war directly. And Chapter 9's Kore-eda closes the thread on a genuinely contemporary note: *Shoplifters*' own family bound by choice rather than blood, straining under real economic precarity, echoes Ozu's own family-under-strain dramas from seven decades earlier — not war trauma this time, but a comparable kind of social fracture, processed the same quiet way.

An Honest Complication: Not Every Chapter Fits

This is a real, recurring thread — not a totalizing one. Chapter 8's live-action manga industry runs on a different logic entirely (adapting an existing print property, not processing national memory), and Ultraman and Kamen Rider's own tokusatsu optimism (Chapter 5) reads far more as forward-looking heroism than backward-looking trauma. Treating every chapter of this course as secretly "about" the war would overstate the case. The thread is real and worth noticing — but it's one real current running through this course's own history, not the whole of it.

Where Every Chapter Fits

CHAPTER	REAL THEME
1	Framing the course's own scope, sources, and boundary with anime
2	The prewar and early-postwar baseline: benshi narrators and the onnagata convention
3	The golden age under real Occupation constraint — Kurosawa, Ozu, and Mizoguchi
4	Jidaigeki's suppression and return, and two real, documented Hollywood remake disputes
5	Tokusatsu's real founding figure, and the J-horror boom's own international reversal
6	The New Wave's genuinely corporate origin, and Oshima's real, unresolved censorship battle

CHAPTER	REAL THEME
7	NHK, commercial broadcasting, and the real birth of trendy drama
8	Live-action manga adaptation, and this course's own explicit boundary with anime
9	Kore-eda's real Palme d'Or, and streaming's structural change to global reach

What This Course Doesn't Cover

A real, honest scope note: this course leaves out several genuinely significant threads. Japan's own substantial documentary filmmaking tradition gets no real depth here. The pink film (pinku eiga) industry — a real, commercially significant part of Japanese cinema history in its own right — isn't covered. Regional and independent production outside the major studios and networks gets only glancing attention. And, as stated from Chapter 1 onward, anime and manga remain entirely out of scope, reserved for a genuine future sibling course in this site's own Culture Subject.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Kurosawa built *Rashomon*'s own moral ambiguity partly because he couldn't depict the war directly. Do you think a constraint like that tends to produce more interesting art than a director would have made with no restriction at all, or does it just channel the same instinct into a different shape?

REFLECTION 2

This chapter's own honest complication admits the thread doesn't fit every chapter. Do you think that kind of acknowledged limit makes the thread more credible, or does naming a pattern this explicitly always risk overstating how connected the material actually is?

REFLECTION 3

Of everything named in this course's own honest scope note — documentary film, pink film, regional cinema, or anime and manga — which would you most want a future course to pick up first?

QUICK REFERENCE — THE FULL COURSE, TRACED

- Rashomon's own moral ambiguity is a real, documented response to Occupation censorship that forbade depicting the war directly
- Jidaigeki's suppression and return, and Godzilla's real atomic-trauma origin, are this thread's two most explicit, most verified instances
- The thread runs through the New Wave's explicit WWII focus and resurfaces in a contemporary form in Kore-eda's *Shoplifters* — but doesn't fit every chapter, and isn't claimed to
- This course's own honest scope leaves documentary film, pink film, regional cinema, and anime/manga for a future course

Course Complete

This closes Japanese Film & Television's own 10 chapters — from 1899's *Momijigari* through the golden age, jidaigeki, tokusatsu and J-horror, the New Wave, the birth of television and J-drama, the real boundary with anime, and the streaming era — traced through one real, recurring thread the course kept finding along the way.