

“Be persistent in exploring human nature, and dare to run around in no-man’s land”

Veteran Japanese director Shohei Imamura dies

Richard Phillips
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Shohei Imamura, one of Japan’s most interesting and prolific post-World War II filmmakers died on May 30 from liver cancer. The 79-year-old director and scriptwriter is survived by a wife, daughter and two sons. He was a key figure in the Nuberu Bagu (Japanese New Wave) and best known for his innovative, often dark, portrayals of social life in contemporary Japan.

Many of Imamura’s characters are poverty-stricken women and invariably social outcasts—prostitutes, pimps, pornographers, black marketeers or others on the margins of society—but always portrayed with the utmost humanity and objectivity.

Imamura remained an uncompromising defender of these social layers. His early works are psychologically intricate and bawdy, and they challenge the moral values of Japanese society, contrasting the empty promises of democracy and freedom by the US military occupiers and early post-WWII governments with the reality of corruption and criminality.

Born on 15 September 1926 in Tokyo, the third son of a doctor, Imamura was interested in the theatre at an early age and in 1945 studied literature at Waseda University, where he wrote plays and acted. On graduation in 1951, he joined Shochiku Films and worked with several directors, including Yasujiro Ozu on *Early Summer* (1951), *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (1952) and *Tokyo Story* (1953).



Shohei Imamura

Reacting against what he considered to be Ozu’s conservatism, rigid camerawork and overly formal relationship with his actors, Imamura transferred to the Nikkatsu studios in 1954, where he worked as an assistant director and scriptwriter to director Yuzo Kawashima. In 1958 Imamura was given the opportunity to make his first feature—*Stolen Desire*, a black comedy about an itinerant acting troupe working in the rough-and-tumble red light districts—and quickly followed it that year with two other movies—*Light of Night* and *Endless Desire*.

Imamura wrote and directed *My Second Brother* (1959), which deals

with the plight of four orphans in a poor Japanese mining town, and then six brilliant films: *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), about teenagers attempting to survive by selling pigs fed on food wastes left by US occupying forces; *The Insect Woman* (1963), a tragicomedy tracing the life of a country girl forced into war production factories and then, after Japan’s defeat in WWII, into prostitution; *Unholy Desire* (1964), about rape and oppression; *The Pornographers—An Introduction to Anthropology*, (1965), a black comedy about a man involved in the blue movie industry who becomes obsessed with his lover’s daughter; the innovative *Man Vanishes* (1967), a blend of sociological documentary and fiction about men deserting their wives and families; and *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968), a drama about the interaction of tribal existence on a remote island with contemporary social life.

European critics did not immediately embrace the first of these movies, because they challenged prevailing conceptions of contemporary Japan. But Imamura’s reputation quickly grew amongst lovers of serious cinema.

In the 1970s he directed *The History of Postwar Japan as told by a Bar Hostess* and the acclaimed crime thriller *Vengeance is Mine*.

Following the breakdown of the Japanese studio system and dwindling opportunities for full-time cinema training in the mid-1970s, Imamura established the Japanese Academy of Visual Arts, which he headed until the last years of his life.

The director’s approach to cinema was summed up in the following advice to his students: “We don’t need geniuses. Don’t let ‘common sense’ crimp your style. Be persistent in exploring human nature, and dare to run around in no-man’s land.”

In the early years of the next decade, Imamura wrote and directed two historical dramas—*Eijanaika* (1981) set in 1860s Japan, not long after Japan’s ruling elite had opened trade and political ties with the West, and *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983), a graphic depiction of the harsh existence for ordinary people in a primitive nineteenth century Japanese village. His next movie, *Zengen* (1987), was based on the autobiography of a Japanese expatriate prostitution racketeer during the early twentieth century.

In contrast to the often-frenetic pace of his earlier movies, Imamura’s next feature *Black Rain* (1989) is measured and visually lyrical. It is about the impact of radiation sickness on a rural village following the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima. A deeply moving work, it is one of the director’s best films.

After a nine-year break, during which he suffered a stroke, Imamura wrote and directed *The Eel* (1997), a light comedy about the rehabilitation of a murderer, which won a Palme d’Or award at Cannes. In fact, *The Eel* and his earlier film, *The Ballad of Narayama*, both won Palme d’Ors,

making him one of only three international directors who have twice won this award.

In 1998 Imamura directed *Dr Akagi*, a film set in a small Japanese seaside town in the last months of WWII and loosely based on the life of his father. For an artist in the twilight of his years, it is a remarkable and deeply humane work.

As WWS Arts editor David Walsh commented in 1998, *Dr Akagi* was a commendable work because, in contrast to most contemporary movies, it contained “a fierce hatred of what exists and a genuinely radical willingness to confront and even embrace human behavior in all its dimensions” (see “David Walsh reviews the 23rd Toronto International Film Festival”).

Imamura followed *Dr Akagi* with the comedy *Warm Water Under a Red Bridge* (2001) and a contribution to *11'09''01—September 11*, a collection of short films by 11 international directors, produced in response to the 2001 terrorist attack on the US.

Imamura's segment dealt with the Hiroshima atomic bombing and a mentally deranged WWII Japanese soldier who believes he is a snake. The film concludes with the comment, “There is no such thing as a holy war.” Imamura said that he wanted to highlight the dubious character of any “holy war” declared by those in political power.

Shohei Imamura directed 20 feature films during an almost 50-year career and vowed to keep working until his death. He leaves a significant artistic legacy and one that honestly portrays the messy realities of life, with all its complexities and often-bizarre contradictions.

This legacy, however, has been misunderstood by some contemporary filmmakers, who have preoccupied themselves with the more excessive or violent aspects of Imamura's characters or translated the director's non-judgmental attitude towards his protagonists into a cold aloofness. They have done a great disservice to Imamura, because his socially insightful observations were infused with a genuine warmth and humanity.

Below we reprint a WWS interview with Imamura during a visit to Sydney, Australia. It was published on September 19, 2000.

Richard Phillips: Could you explain your initial influences as a filmmaker, and why you decided to explore the lives of the most oppressed layers of society?

Shohei Imamura: Let me answer the first part of your question. I should tell you that I have very deep respect for Akira Kurosawa. This is someone I idolised. At first I thought that he was a bit too rough but then learnt more about how he worked. For example, he used Toshiro Mifune in most of his films. I once visited Toho Studios and I saw Mifune and formed the opinion that he was not a good actor. He was really dreadful and had a dialect, a heavy accent in Japanese, and didn't seem to know the first thing about acting. But under the direction of Kurosawa he became a great performer. I was deeply impressed with how Kurosawa was able to mould Mifune from a ham into a really excellent actor.

RP: And the second part of my question?

SI: You are not the first one to ask me this question. Many people, not only in Japan, but also overseas have asked this. I'm not sure why you ask and I don't want you to look at my characters and say they are all oppressed or that they are the bottom of society. I don't agree with the way these people have been treated.

Many years ago, I was friendly with a well-known scriptwriter, who used to work with Yasujiro Ozu, and was staying with him at his holiday house. I was working on one of my scripts—it was a serious work—and he stood up from the fireplace, which was in the centre of the room, and came over and began reading the script over my shoulder. I thought this was a rather horrible and nasty thing to do, but then he said, “Oh you are still writing about beggars and all those dropouts from the mainstream of society.”

I didn't like this comment and it really started to get on my nerves

because I didn't think this was the correct way to characterise these people, the ones you call oppressed. Even though some of the things these people say might sound ridiculous, their lives and the experiences they pass through are true-life issues and their comments are from the heart. They are human beings and even though they might be at the bottom of society, what they say is true. And if you are not moved by what they say and do in my films, then it is really my fault, not theirs, because it means that my films haven't accurately reflected their true feelings.

When I was younger I was angered about the comments of the big-guy filmmakers. I tried to rebel, but they just laughed at me. Unfortunately I couldn't really argue because they didn't treat me as an equal and so their statements hurt me very much.

After the comments from this leading scriptwriter I lay in bed that night and wondered how could I possibly argue against these big people. Then I decided, all right, if they don't like my ideas and treat them this way then I will only write about oppressed people all my life. I didn't say this openly, but kept it in my mind. I didn't have the confidence or the position to argue against them but this is what I decided to do.

RP: Could you comment on Japanese cinema and the present environment for filmmakers, compared to when you began making films?

SI: The way contemporary filmmakers approach their work can change rapidly, but if you ask me whether contemporary filmmakers are really looking straight into the social and political environment then I have to say it is quite dubious. There are many question marks about where contemporary films are heading and there are few films made today which indicate that the directors have a strong grip on the situation facing ordinary people. They don't seem to be able to look squarely at the real situation.

RP: Most of your films deal with the poverty and social problems of immediate post-war Japan. Are any contemporary filmmakers dealing with the social issues produced by unemployment, the ongoing economic recession in Japan today?

SI: No, there are very few filmmakers examining these issues. A director could explore some of these themes for a long time and then, after it has accumulated for a long time in his mind, one day it will explode to the surface as a work. Unfortunately there are not many filmmakers looking at these questions.

RP: Your film *Black Rain*, which is being screened in Sydney next weekend, explores the inner torment of the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The film is very powerful and concludes with a strong antiwar statement from one of the characters. Could you comment?

SI: *Black Rain* refers to the radiation that fell on people after the atomic bombing. Most of those covered with this rain suffered terrible health problems and many died. My film is based on the well-known novel by Masuji Ibuse, which tells about the problems facing a young woman who was covered with black rain and therefore has great difficulty finding a prospective husband.

The novel is long and we could not put everything in the film, so I had to be selective. I met and talked in depth with many bomb survivors and was able to get a first-hand understanding of the cruelty and horror of the bomb. Some of the victims were badly disfigured and it was difficult to look into their eyes. It was very hard to produce a script that fully conveyed the terrible horror of this event.

RP: What was the response to the film when you first screened it.

SI: It was shown to foreign press correspondents in Japan after it was first released and we asked for their comments. Some journalists declared that because the Japanese started the Pacific War they shouldn't be complaining about the consequences. These severe comments came from the journalists from neighbouring countries such as Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Korea.

I tried to counter these statements by explaining that even if the war was started by Japan we want people to recognise the consequences of atomic

weapons and war. I am afraid my argument was not philosophical enough for the journalists and they didn't seem to agree.

In America, and many other countries, the general opinion was that the bombing was the right thing to do. Although thousands of people were killed in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, many still argue that it was justified. Irrespective of these views we have an obligation to pass on the facts of this terrible event and make use of this film in every way possible to show the consequences of war.

RP: What role can cinema play in changing social life?

SI: It is a lot easier to be obedient and stay with the establishment, but this is not my way of life. I always try to change society completely with my films. Of course, filmmaking is not like catch. You can throw the ball but there is no guarantee that it will be caught.

RP: What is the most important quality that young filmmakers must develop today?

SI: I am quite old now and have had many experiences that allow me to answer this question. I have been writing film scenarios for many years but sometimes feel that things I have said have been exaggerated, or not reported accurately. So whenever I am writing a script I am very aware that my films must be true.

This situation also confronts young scenario writers. They might get a good idea, become deeply involved in it and get so carried away with this idea that they end up telling lies. I think the most important thing is that their art must be true.

Another crucial quality for young filmmakers is courage. They must have courage to cut off any part of their film that is not true or accurate.

Let me give you an example. Near the end of *Black Rain*, the young girl is becoming ill from the fever caused by the radiation and starts to hallucinate. Everyone begins to realise that her days are numbered. Her uncle takes her to a pond where he had put some small carp fish months earlier. There are pampas grasses alongside the pond and it is quite a cold day. Suddenly a large carp jumps out of the pond and they are both very excited. The fish is about a metre long and she starts hitting the pampas grasses with her shawl in excitement and the pollen starts floating in the air, almost like snow.

This is an extremely beautiful and emotional scene but if it were extended it would become a lie. The impact of this scene on the audience is strong because it conveys the loneliness and sorrow of the young girl and the suffering of her uncle. It moves the viewers and demonstrates how sad and difficult it is to be a radiation victim.

Toru Takemitsu, a well-known Japanese composer who did the music for the movie, asked me to extend this scene because it is very good emotionally. But it has always been my policy not to get carried away by emotions and I was surprised that this brilliant composer wanted me to extend the scene.

So there was always a conflict between my policy of not being too emotional and being true to the fact, without being cold and not reaching the audience. This is a good example of how you must resist the pressures of others and hold to your own values. I have always insisted that I would never tell lies in my movies, to only tell the truth. This is a big principle for me.

In recent years, however, I have begun to explore fantasies. At the moment I am working on a new script about a woman passing through menopause who has fantasies and shoplifts. In this script I have to create her fantasies, so the difficulty is in creating truthful fantasies, or moments that are not exactly true in life. This is an interesting contradiction.

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