

BLACK RAIN

FILM NOIR IN POSTWAR JAPAN

Imogen Sara Smith

Ruined buildings and neon signs are reflected in the dark, oily surface of a stagnant pond. Noxious bubbles rise to the surface of the water, which holds the drowned corpses of a bicycle, a straw sandal, and a child's doll. In Akira Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* (1948), this fetid swamp is the center of a disheveled, yakuza-infested Tokyo neighborhood and a symbol of the sickness rotting the soul of postwar Japan. It breeds mosquitos, typhus, and tuberculosis. Around its edges, people mourn their losses, patch their wounds, drown their sorrows, and wrestle with what they have been, what they are, what they want to be.

Things looked black for Japan in the aftermath of World War II. Black markets sprang up, as they did in every war-damaged country. Radioactive "black rain" fell after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Black Spring* was the title of a 1953 publication that cited Japanese women's accounts of rape by Occupation forces. In "Early Japanese Noir" (2014), Homer B. Pettay wrote that in Japanese language and culture, "absence, failure, or being wrong is typified by blackness, as it also indicates the Japanese cultural abhorrence for imperfection or defilement, as in dirt, filth, smut, or being charred." In films about postwar malaise like *Drunken Angel*, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Women of the Night* (1948), and Masaki Kobayashi's *Black River* (1957), filth is everywhere: pestilent cesspools, burnt-out rubble, grungy alleys, garbage-strewn lots, sleazy pleasure districts, squalid shacks, and all the human misery and depravity that go along with these settings. For about a decade after the war, Japanese cinema held up an unsparing mirror to the nation as it struggled to rebuild and move beyond the shame of defeat.





Japanese Girls at the Harbor (left) and *Women of the Night* (right, with Kinuyo Tanaka and Sanae Takasugi) both feature complex relationships between women living on the margins of society

Like plants that spring up after fires, noir thrives in destabilized societies, expressing their disillusionment, anxiety, and uncertainty. Few countries experienced more radical and disorienting change in the twentieth century than Japan, which after centuries of isolation went through a rapid spurt of modernization, followed by the rise of militaristic nationalism climaxing in the cataclysm of World War II. During the war, the government banned Hollywood movies and censored the film industry, demanding stories that upheld traditional values and glorified the nation's history. Afterward, American occupiers imposed their own restrictions, banning support for feudal or nationalist systems and expressions of "anti-democratic" values. Yet cinema flourished in the postwar years, demonstrating Japan's cultural vitality, boldly confronting the country's past and future, and expressing a dynamic ambivalence toward its national identity.

In his 1948 essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Robert Warshaw wrote that democracies are committed to an optimistic faith in progress; only feudal and monarchical societies can enjoy the luxury of a fatalistic or pessimistic view of life. American noir represents a subversive countercurrent to the prevailing religion of success and continual improvement; Japanese noir, by contrast, is just one more expression of a cultural tolerance for tragedy. The dreamy, lush, glamorous side of Hollywood noir is entirely absent from these postwar films; instead there is a neorealist emphasis on sweat, grime, dust, desperation, sickness, and abject poverty, sometimes reaching a pitch of feverish excess. Here, noir is not merely an interior mood, or an underworld into which a careless individual can slip; it is the condition of a whole society, inescapable as the weather.

BLACK HAIR

The evolution of film noir in Japan began well before World War II. In the early 1930s, Yasujiro Ozu, known for his serene, delicately heartbreaking domestic dramas, made several stylish crime dramas that are at once openly indebted to Hollywood and thrillingly innovative, demonstrating the extent to which the Japanese invented their own film grammar. Silent movies like his jazzy, witty *Dragnet Girl* (1933) and director Tomu Uchida's brooding, emotionally charged *Police Officer* (1933) tackle themes of disillusionment, guilt, and the confusion of young people trapped in the cultural crossfire between tradition and modernity, East and West. Meanwhile, the country's great heritage of female-centered dramas laid bare the rotten deal Japanese women got from the society's rigid gender hierarchy. Hiroshi Shimizu's *Japanese Girls at the Harbor* (1933), a lyrical but wised-up fallen woman saga, takes a noir turn when the heroine, in one reckless, life-changing moment, pulls a gun and shoots her romantic rival. She becomes a drifting dance-hall hostess, resigned to the fact that, as her tough-cookie friend puts it, "Life is short, but troubles are endless."

Japanese cinema's poet laureate of female pain was Kenji Mizoguchi, who relentlessly portrayed women's place as chattel, forced to sell their bodies as their only assets and then cast aside the moment they transgress or lose the bloom of youth. Mizoguchi's breakthrough films, *Osaka Elegy* (1936) and *Sisters of the Gion* (1936), explode the sentimental enshrinement of women's loyalty and self-sacrifice. In the former, Isuzu Yamada plays a working girl who succumbs to life as a kept mistress in order to help her ungrate-



Masaki Kobayashi's gorgeous *Kwaidan* (right) launched the genre of ghost movies that includes *Kuroneko* (left, with Nobuko Otowa), and continues to influence today's J-horror

ful family, who in turn reject her when she is arrested for cheating a lecherous older businessman. In the final scene, she stands on a bridge at night, looking down at the garbage floating in the dark water, and admits that she has become a “stray dog,” without home, family, or moral anchor.

Mizoguchi returned to Osaka in 1948, using the rubble-strewn, battered cityscape as a backdrop for one of his most harrowing films, *Women of the Night*. It is not only about women descending into prostitution, mistreated by men and society, but about women descending into savagery, so brutalized that they themselves become cruel enforcers of their own wretched lot. There are several scenes in which mobs of streetwalkers surround a girl or woman and viciously beat her; these horrible spectacles are set in bombed-out lots or, in the climactic instance, the wreckage of a church, the ruins heavily-handedly symbolizing the decay of humanity. Disease, specifically syphilis, is another metaphor for a desperately ailing society. Fusako, played with spirit and sensitivity by the great Kinuyo Tanaka, loses her husband to the war, her baby to tuberculosis, and her parents to malnutrition; after discovering that her boss/lover is also sleeping with her sister and has given them both a venereal disease, she becomes a streetwalker, declaring her intention to get revenge on men by infecting as many of them as she can. Meanwhile, her naive teenage sister-in-law is raped and then forced into prostitution by a nasty girl gang. It is easy to see why women living through such experiences would become hardened, preferring to dish out punishment rather than take it, but by the end the viewer herself feels thoroughly pummeled and abraded.

Japanese noir suffers from a glaring shortage of femmes fatales.

For stories about women scheming to destroy men, you have to look to supernatural horror films like *Kuroneko* (*The Black Cat* [1968]), about the ghosts of women who seduce and kill samurai to avenge their own rape and murder, or the “Black Hair” episode of *Kwaidan* (1964). (Vengeful female spirits are common in Japanese folklore—and no wonder.) It is refreshing to come across a film with a female protagonist who defies her victimization. Keisuke Kinoshita’s *Woman* (1948) is as compressed as a haiku: barely more than an hour long, with only two characters, and set over a single afternoon.

“ The film is not only about women descending into prostitution but about women descending into savagery, so brutalized that they themselves become cruel enforcers of their own wretched lot.



Toshiko (Mitsuko Mito) is a dancer, first seen doing the rumba in a stage revue; her lover Tadashi (Eitarō Ozawa) shows up backstage, limping suspiciously, and convinces her to run away with him. Reading headlines about a home-invasion burglary in which a policeman was stabbed, she puts two and two together and tries to break free from him. In a long, intimate confrontation, he pressures her to stay, manipulating her with passionate declarations of love and promises to reform, while she struggles with indecision and conflicted feelings. The film is explosively stylish, with more tilted shots than *The Third Man* (1949); the rapid editing, huge close-ups, and low angles on people in natural landscapes seem to draw more on Soviet cinema than the conventions of film noir. But the tangle of uncertainty, shame, and distrust in this toxic relationship is pure noir. Toshiko laments how her lover “dragged her down into corruption,” coercing her to work as a bar hostess and extort money from men. Tadashi blames society and the war for his descent into criminality, tearing up as they listen to schoolchildren sing a folk song about

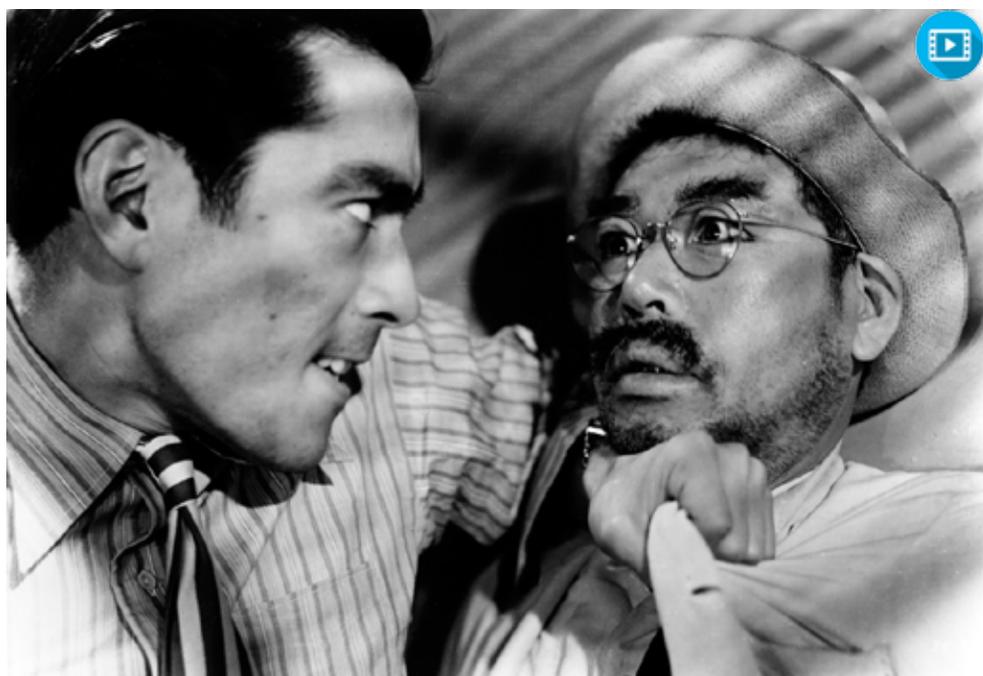
a dragonfly. When she softens, moved by his distress, a tiny, cynical twitch of the mouth gives him away. Will she see through him? The question builds as much suspense as any thriller.

BLACK MARKETS

Akira Kurosawa often embeds messages in the landscapes of his movies. In *High and Low* (1963), he maps social inequality onto the topography of Yokohama, creating the starkest contrast between the sleek, modern aerie of a wealthy businessman and the hellish, broiling slums below where a kidnapper plots against him. In the humanist masterpiece *Ikiru* (1952), a polluted vacant lot symbolizes the waste that results from a callous, negligent bureaucracy. In *Drunken Angel* it is that poisonous sump that represents a literally and figuratively diseased society.

Takashi Shimura plays a scruffy but compassionate doctor who rails against both the unhealthy conditions of the slums and the stupidity of those Japanese who remain enslaved by what he calls “that feudal loyalty crap.” One night he removes a bullet from the hand of a yakuza and diagnoses him with tuberculosis, setting off a volatile relationship in which the hot-tempered “angel” tries to convince the proud, self-destructive hoodlum to change his ways. Toshiro Mifune is electrifying in his first of sixteen films with Kurosawa. Startlingly handsome and flashily dressed in a pinstriped sport coat with greasy hair hanging down in his face, he drunkenly jitterbugs in a dance hall to the “Jungle Boogie.” His character is tragic, even pathetic, as his faith in the yakuza code of honor and loyalty is shattered by the realization that the boss sees him as an expendable pawn. Mifune’s raw, rough-edged energy and visceral physicality make him a potent representative of a wounded, confused society needing to be cured of its delusions.

In *Stray Dog* (1949), Mifune brings the same force and charisma to the very different role of Murakami, a dedicated rookie cop trying to recover his pistol after it is stolen on a crowded bus. Mortified by his carelessness, Murakami becomes frantic with guilt when his Colt turns up in a series of robberies and killings. Yusa, the



Frequent co-stars Toshiro Mifune and Takashi Shimura in a tense confrontation from *Drunken Angel*. The older actor became a fatherly mentor to the young Mifune, whose parents had been killed in the war



Mifune (back to camera) confronts Tutomu Yamazaki as the jailed kidnapper in the final scene from *High and Low*, whose original title in Japanese translates as *Heaven and Hell*

thief, is overtly presented as his doppelgänger: both young men are veterans of the defeated army, members of what a wise older cop (Shimura again) calls the “après-guerre” generation. Recalling his own directionless anger when he was demobilized, Murakami sees Yusa as what he might have become, and is determined to track down and eliminate his evil twin. To do so, he disguises himself as a down-and-out ex-soldier, haunting the downtown alleys where he’s been told that if he wanders around looking desperate, the dealers in illegal guns will find him.

The eight-minute, nearly wordless sequence that follows, shot on location around black markets in the Tokyo neighborhoods of Asakusa and Ueno, is one of the greatest evocations of *shitamachi* (literally “low town”): the city’s underbelly, a labyrinth of narrow, ramshackle alleys and crowds milling around shabby food stalls. Sweltering heat seems to dissolve and blur the images in this hypnotic, kaleidoscopic montage. Dusty, hazy sun flickers through bamboo lattices, casting a broken net of shadows over everything. We see Murakami’s feet tromping, his eyes darting. He passes rows of lounging prostitutes, idle derelicts, and grimy children. The universal mood—among sweat-glazed chorus girls, petty thugs, and police alike—is tense exhaustion. When Murakami finally chases down Yusa, wrestling him to the ground and handcuffing him, the two men collapse side by side, panting like the rabid-looking dog under the film’s credits. Then Yusa, hearing a children’s song and seeing weedy flowers nodding above him, starts to whimper, wail, and howl with anguish. Despite the movie’s reassuring happy ending, it is a sound you can’t soon forget.

A similar encounter comes at the end of *High and Low*, a structurally brilliant thriller that is also a probing examination of personal and social responsibility. Loosely based on Ed McBain’s 1959 novel *King’s Ransom*, the story focuses on Kingo Gondo (Mifune), a shoe company executive caught up in a critical business deal. When a kidnapper tries to abduct his son but accidentally snatches the chauffeur’s boy, he must decide whether he is willing to sacrifice his fortune for someone else’s child. The opening act, entirely set

“ Sweltering heat seems to dissolve and blur the images in this hypnotic, kaleidoscopic montage. Dusty, hazy sun flickers through bamboo lattices, casting a broken net of shadows over everything.



Toshiro Mifune among the ruins in *The Bad Sleep Well*. Kurosawa borrowed elements from Hamlet in this tale of a son seeking vengeance on his father's killers

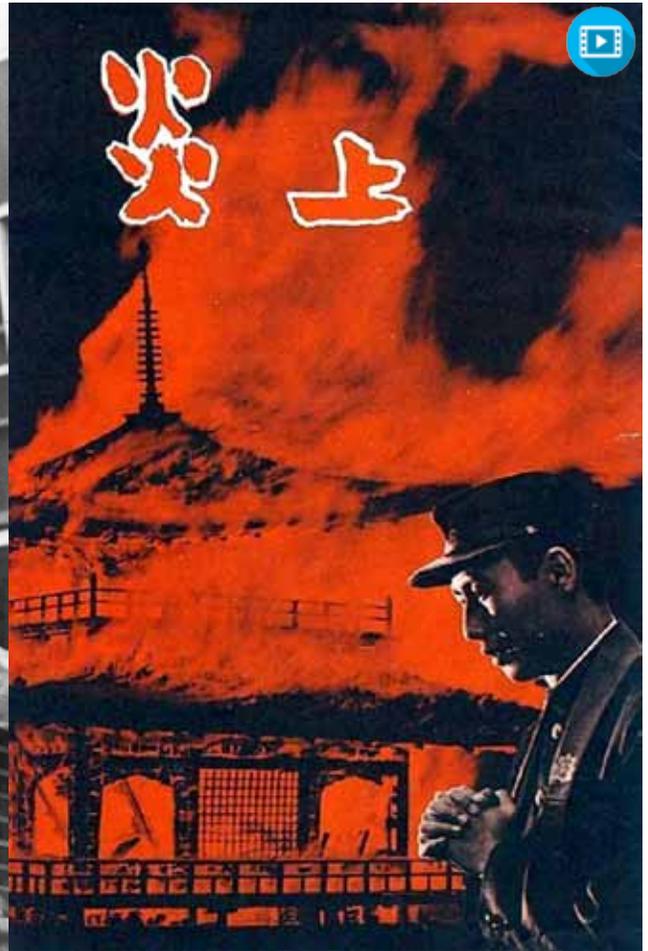
in Gondo's modernist living room, is a masterpiece of minimalist choreography and minutely controlled character development, after which the film changes gears for an exciting sequence on a high-speed train, location-shot urban chases, and a plunge into the Dantean inferno of junkies writhing in "Dope Alley." In the final scene, Gondo confronts the kidnapper in a prison visiting room, and the reflection of his face on the partition between them makes the two men seem to merge.

The most pitch-black of all Kurosawa's crime films, *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), unfolds amid sleek, modern offices and comfortable homes populated by men in dark three-piece suits, worlds away from the blighted, hardscrabble settings of *Drunken Angel* and *Stray Dog*. (A final act takes place in the vast, rubble-strewn wasteland of a bombed munitions factory, where characters reminisce about surviving carpet-bombing and scavenging a living after the war.) But the moral decay that Kurosawa uncovers in Japan's prosperous corporate sphere is worse than anything found in the slums. The executives of the Public Corporation for Land Development stop at nothing, not even murder, to cover up a bid-rigging deal and their habit of lining their pockets with kickbacks.

Unsparring in its corrosive pessimism, *The Bad Sleep Well* is also a gripping, meticulously crafted drama. Kurosawa designs black-and-white widescreen compositions with Euclidean rigor, deepening the screen space with triangular arrangements of people, and plays with patterns of formality and disruption. In the long opening sequence, a stuffy wedding ceremony drags on through the invasions of police, a Greek chorus of reporters, the stumbling of nervous executives,

and a bombshell in the form of a mysterious wedding cake. This is all part of an elaborate plot by Nishi (Mifune), the son of a man hounded to suicide by the Public Corporation, to seek revenge on his father's killers. He enlists Wada, a low-level clerk expected to take the fall to hush up an investigation, to fake his own suicide and then appear as a ghost, driving one guilty executive to insanity. To convince Wada to turn against his bosses, Nishi takes him to observe his own funeral: as they sit in a parked car, he plays a tape recording he surreptitiously made of three top executives callously discussing their employee's convenient death in a nightclub called (no kidding) *Noir*. The sound of cheesy lounge music and tinkling cocktails is overlaid on the vision of a ceremonious funeral, where the same corrupt businessmen hypocritically mourn beside Wada's sobbing wife and daughter.

Nishi realizes that the corrupt system is unshakable because it rests on the most hallowed of Japanese values: hierarchical loyalty, which ensures that underlings will sacrifice themselves to protect higher-ups and their company. Even Iwabuchi (Masayuki Mori), the corporate vice president who is the film's icy, hateful villain, can't stop bowing obsequiously while talking on the phone with his boss, the president. Nishi suffers from his growing, guilt-ridden love for Iwabuchi's disabled daughter, whom he married to advance his scheme. He realizes that hatred has made him cruel, but his essential decency is what dooms him. *The Bad Sleep Well* insists, to the bitter end, on the truth of its peerless title. It does the unthinkable, from Hollywood's standpoint, crushing our expectations that justice will triumph and evil will be defeated.



Yukio Mishima, author of the source novel for *Conflagration* (right), became a right-wing nationalist and committed *hara-kiri* in 1970 after a failed coup attempt. He deplored the American influence on Japan, which is evident in *Black River* (left, with Tatsuya Nakadai and Ineko Arima)

BLACK SPRING

In Kurosawa's postwar films, even those made during the Occupation, you never see the occupiers. The humiliation of the conquerors' presence on Japanese soil was perhaps too sensitive a subject for many films to treat directly—though a few did, including Kinuyo Tanaka's brave debut as a film director, *Love Letter* (1953), which delicately treats the issue of the many Japanese women who became involved with GIs, often out of economic necessity. Masaki Kobayashi's *Black River* is an energetically sordid portrait of the community surrounding an American air force base, a cesspit of seedy bars and brothels where lowlifes try to squeeze whatever cash they can out of their Yankee overlords or their less-fortunate fellow citizens. Set during a heat wave, with everyone perspiring and shedding their clothes, the movie gleefully rubs our noses in grunge, though it revolves around a pair of innocents trying to hold on to the shreds of their decency.

Shizuko (Ineko Arima) is a lovely waitress whose daily walk to work under a white parasol attracts the attention of Joe (Tatsuya Nakadai), a local yakuza boss. She forms a tentative friendship with Nishida (Fumio Watanabe), a poor, conscientious student, but after being raped by Joe—who stages a despicable charade, pretending to rescue her from his own gang and then attacking her himself—she resigns herself to accepting her rapist as a lover. This story plays out against the backdrop of a squalid, chicken-coop-like tenement whose greedy landlady hires Joe to force out the impoverished tenants so they can demolish the building to make way for a love hotel.

No one in the film comes off looking very good, but *Black River* is more than a dose of miserabilism, thanks to its vivid setting and excellent cast, especially Nakadai in his breakthrough film role.

Sporting hip shades and oft-unbuttoned Hawaiian shirts, he makes “Killer” Joe chillingly evil, but also as dangerously sexy and insolently cool as any delinquent rebel played by Marlon Brando or Steve McQueen. Shizuko admits with shame that although she hates Joe—who alternately abuses and sweet-talks her—she is also attracted to him and unable to resist his dominance. In the end, she decides that the only way to cleanse herself of his degrading influence is to kill him, thus completing her moral descent, symbolized by a final image of her abandoned white parasol on a dark, wet bridge. This relationship is perverse but believable, not least because Nakadai is so disturbingly pretty. For the first, but far from the last time in his long (still active) career, he disorients the viewer with his ability to look simultaneously demonic and angelic.

Nakadai has a smaller but still eye-catching role in Kon Ichikawa's *Conflagration* (1958). The film is an adaptation of Yukio Mishima's novel *Kinkaku-ji* (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* [1956]), a fictionalized account of a real incident in 1950 when an emotionally disturbed young Buddhist monk burned down the historic Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto. Raizo Ichikawa (no relation to the director) gives a painfully sensitive and convincing performance as Goichi, a young apprentice monk tormented by a stammer and a troubled family life. The film opens with him sitting mute in a small, bare room as police bombard him with questions,

“ In *Tokyo Twilight*, everyone is cold all the time. Sadness pervades everything like a chill that seeps into the bones; all of the characters live with crushing loneliness and isolation.

and then unfolds in nested flashbacks—set during the war and the Occupation—that offer clues to why he has done the unthinkable: destroyed the pavilion that was not only a “national treasure,” but the thing he loved most in the world.

For the awkward, bullied, isolated Goichi, the temple is the pinnacle of beauty and purity, his refuge from a series of traumatic, disillusioning shocks. As a boy he witnessed his mother having sex with his uncle. He discovers that the head priest at his temple is not only money-grubbing but has a geisha mistress. In a caustic, satirical scene, an American GI brings his pregnant Japanese girlfriend to visit the pavilion; Goichi refuses to let her defile the sacred site, and during a scuffle she falls down the steps, suffering a miscarriage. The soldier is delighted to have the inconvenient problem solved and rewards the young monk with two cartons of Chesterfields. Goichi’s disabled classmate Tokari (Nakadai), a brilliant and devious cynic embittered by a twisted leg, mocks his belief that the golden pavilion is timeless, scoffing, “Idiot! History, people, and morals all change.” In the end, the only way the young monk can save the site from corruption is to torch it; just before a failed suicide attempt, he sees the sublime vision of a million golden sparks swarming up into the sky as the building burns.

“He’s one of those kids who grew up after the war,” remarks one of the cops at the beginning of the film, attributing his neurosis to the “après-guerre” generation. In the late 1950s, Japanese movies turned their attention to youth, with often-sensationalized accounts of juvenile delinquency and hedonistic youth rebellion. This was especially the province of Nikkatsu, a studio that specialized in pulpy entertainment and sought to appeal to young audiences with stories that borrowed from American genre films and spaghetti Westerns, deliberately avoiding any markers of traditional Japanese culture or aesthetics. This style would evolve into “borderless action,” an apt description for the cool, stylized razzle-

dazzle of violent, nihilistic films like *Cruel Gun Story* (1964) and *A Colt Is My Passport* (1967).

There is still a strong flavor of noir in some Nikkatsu films from the late 1950s, like Koreyoshi Kurahara’s *I Am Waiting* (1957) and Toshio Masuda’s *Rusty Knife* (1958). The stars of both films are Yūjirō Ishihara and Mie Kitahara, a pair who had rocketed to fame in the successfully scandalous *Crazed Fruit* (1956). In these films, Ishihara brings his air of tortured, defiant youth to conventional revenge plots, and there is a pervasive mood of hopelessness and melancholy—the young characters are already burdened by their pasts. This is most effective in the wonderful opening of *I Am Waiting*, set on a gloomy stretch of industrial waterfront where two lonely, damaged people find a fleeting interlude of kindness. Unfortunately, their hesitant romance is abandoned in favor of hard-boiled formula as Ishihara tangles with gangsters and hunts his brother’s killer through a succession of smoky bars, pool halls, and cabarets.

A similar, but far more profound and devastating portrait of alienated youth emerged the same year from the venerable director Yasujiro Ozu. His bleakest postwar film, *Tokyo Twilight* (1957), is set largely at night and filled with desolate images of the city. Scarred by her mother’s abandonment, troubled college student Akiko (Ineko Arima) falls in with a bad crowd, gets pregnant by a selfish, immature boyfriend, has an abortion, and winds up dead beneath the wheels of a train. Sulky, stubborn, and taking out her unhappiness on everyone, Akiko is hard to like, but she lives in an icy, unforgiving world. Even her older sister, played by the reliably saintly Setsuko Hara, is breathtakingly cruel at times. Whereas films like *Stray Dog* and *Black River* used heat as a metaphor for the forces of moral dissolution, in *Tokyo Twilight* everyone is cold all the time: wearing coats indoors, huddling around little heaters, complaining about the weather. Sadness pervades everything like a chill that seeps into the bones; all of the characters live with crushing loneliness and isolation. The cause is not Japan’s unique postwar plight. It is simply the condition of being human in the modern world. ■



Ineko Arima in Ozu’s haunting *Tokyo Twilight*, which deals with the breakdown of the Japanese family