



## Labyrinth of Cinema

海辺の映画館 -キネマの玉手箱-

2019/179min/Colour/English Subtitles

Distributor: AMG Entertainment

Director: OBAYASHI Nobuhiko

Cast: ATSUGI Takuro, HOSOYAMADA Takahito, HOSODA Yoshihiko

### Online screening information:

**Sat 27 Feb** 48 hour rental window from 10.00am

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The Second World War, and Japan's decisive defeat in it, was the central experience of that nation's modern history. The dominant values of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Japan - broadly democratic, capitalist, pro-Western and pacifist - are rooted in that defeat, the subsequent American Occupation, and the Japanese response to those events. It is no surprise that such a defining experience should have stimulated a wide range of cinematic interpretations. Viewers are, however, unlikely to have encountered a war film quite like Nobuhiko Obayashi's *Labyrinth of Cinema* (2019), a stylised and self-conscious take on the Japanese war experience which is simultaneously horrifying, absurd, infuriating and, ultimately, moving.

Practically as soon as the Second World War was over, Japanese cinema began to take stock of it. During and just after the Occupation, *Desertion at Dawn* (1950) explored the cruelty of the Chinese campaign, while *Vacuum Zone* (1952) indicted the militarists. The first films to tackle the atomic bombings, *The Bells of Nagasaki* (1950), *I'll Not Forget the Song of Nagasaki* (1952) and *Children of Hiroshima* (1952) also emerged at this time, concentrating on their human toll and tragedy. Later, Masaki Kobayashi's three-part epic *The Human Condition* (1959-61) offered a pacifist and humanist vision of the war, showing how one man tries to maintain his integrity in the face of militarist brutality and oppression; Yasuzo Masumura's *The Red Angel* (1966) stressed the horror of the conflict through the experiences of a nurse working at the Chinese front; and Kihachi Okamoto's *The Human Bullet* (1968) offered a modernist and absurdist account of the futility of war. These films of the early postwar decades were the creations of artists who had all lived through World War II and some of whom had seen active service. Tomotaka Tasaka, director of *I'll Not Forget the Song of Nagasaki*, had himself been injured at Hiroshima. It is surely no coincidence that in their different ways, their films were all insistently anti-war. All lamented the sufferings of Japanese civilians and enlisted men; several sharply critiqued the military authorities, or condemned the atrocities committed by Japanese troops in the field.

In the twenty-first century, a more equivocal perspective has been offered in films such as *Yamato* (2005) and *The Eternal Zero* (2013). The tone and outlook of these films stirred debate: some commentators found them sentimental, while others (including, in the latter case, the renowned animator Hayao Miyazaki) accused them of peddling nationalist myths. What is not in doubt is that they are glossy commercial entertainment films, on the Hollywood model - a style more conducive to emotionalism than to reflection. Again, it was surely significant that this development took place at a time when few retained first-hand memories of World War II and its horrors.

It was against this backdrop that veteran director Nobuhiko Obayashi (1938-2020) made his final film, *Labyrinth of Cinema*. He directed it knowing that he was terminally ill, and the film is animated by the urgency of his desire to communicate with future generations. But the film's seriousness does not result in solemnity, nor does Obayashi

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approach the theme of war in a conventionally realistic fashion. Rather, as Mark Schilling writes, “the border between reality and fantasy dissolves into a colourful alternative universe that is uniquely Obayashi’s.”

A former avant-garde filmmaker and director of commercials, Obayashi was nearly forty when he began to make feature films. He achieved great success in the 1980s with such good-natured fantasies as *Exchange Students* (1982) and *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (1983). These films, like a number of others by the director, were set in Obayashi’s hometown of Onomichi, a picturesque small town situated beside the Inland Sea (the strip of water dividing Japan’s main island of Honshu from the smaller Shikoku) and known to cinephiles worldwide as the home of the elderly couple in Yasujiro Ozu’s *Tokyo Story*. The framing story of *Labyrinth of Cinema*, likewise, is set in Onomichi, whose geographical location takes on new significance in the light of its subject matter. Obayashi’s hometown is in Hiroshima Prefecture, about fifty miles east of the prefectural capital. The atomic bomb was dropped on that city when young Nobuhiko was seven years old. The war, moreover, had separated Obayashi from his father, who was conscripted as an army doctor. Obayashi was thus one of the youngest people to have a direct link to the wartime experience. In his later years, that was an experience to which he seems to have felt bound to bear witness.

Thus, in the last decade of his career, the war loomed large, forming the subject of a trilogy of films consisting of *Casting Blossoms to the Sky* (2012), *Seven Weeks* (2014) and *Hanagatami* (2017), as well as *Labyrinth of Cinema*. In Obayashi’s final film, a night at a cinema in Onomichi facing imminent closure transports three young men into history, where they are plunged into the trauma and tragedy of World War II, alongside other instances of violent conflict that have beset Japan. Inevitably, the shadow of Hiroshima looms large, but so too do other aspects of the war: the brutality of military discipline, the atrocities committed by Japanese troops in China, the harrowing experiences of the people of the outlying islands of Okinawa.

In an early scene, a character asks: “Is this a real war or just a movie?” One of the most intriguing aspects of the film is the way in which Obayashi links the theme of war into the history of Japanese cinema. At one point we witness an imagined conversation between celebrated directors Yasujiro Ozu and Sadao Yamanaka (the career of the former was interrupted by the war; that of the latter ended when he was conscripted and died in a Manchurian field hospital). A key plot strand concerns the Sakura-tai, a celebrated troupe of stage actors (several of whom also did significant work in film) who became victims of the Hiroshima bomb. In various scenes, Obayashi parodies the conventions of film genres ranging from science fiction to silent *chanbara* (the action-packed variety of samurai film). But these parodies have a serious purpose: through the former, Obayashi suggests the potential devastation of a future war by imagining his hometown in a state of post-apocalyptic ruin; via the latter, he reminds the viewer of the way in which violent conflict is threaded through Japan’s earlier history too.

A veteran of a pre-digital generation, Obayashi champions cinema, telling us explicitly that “videos on devices aren’t as immersive as movies on a screen” - a statement that comes across ironically at a time when home viewing is the only option. But above all, with unfashionable idealism, he champions cinema’s ability to make a difference. Despite its trickery and self-consciousness, despite its postmodern approach to its theme, Obayashi’s final film is ultimately animated by an old-fashioned liberal humanism, and a touching faith in the ability of art to make a positive contribution to the world. As one of his characters declares, “A movie can change the future, if not the past.”