



Soiree

ソワレ

2020/111min/Colour/English Subtitles
Distributor: Color Bird

Director: SOTOYAMA Bunji
Cast: MURAKAMI Nijiro, IMOJU Haruko

Online screening information:

Fri 26 Feb 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm
Thu 4 Mar 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm

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There are many scenes in *Soiree* which will seem commonplace to any viewer who knows Japan well but obscure to those who do not. These include those shot inside a Pachinko parlour (an arcade of upright pinball machines) which constitute Japan's most popular source of gambling; at the *keirin* bicycle racing track which constitutes another form of popular betting; inside a still-furnished abandoned house and a large abandoned school in the Japanese countryside (in some regions due to depopulation almost 25% of houses, known as *akiya*, and many schools have been left in this state); inside a tiny bar where customers look to the hostess for confirmation of their drunken assessments of the world. Followers of Japanese films will also be accustomed to the increasingly familiar trope of young people who have dropped out of school (as has Takara) and - either by default because of the poor state of the economy or (as Shota's older brother at one point accuses him) by choice - do not have secure jobs but drift through life from one precarious source of income to another.

The central theme of the film, on the other hand, is one which has been less explored in Japanese cinema than in western cinema and the pivotal moment in the film - though it will be shocking to anyone who watches it - may come as a bigger shock to Japanese audiences than to western ones. On the other hand, the Japanese response, in particular the response of the police, to that incident will puzzle western audiences more than Japanese ones. This central theme is child abuse - and the trauma that it causes - which is a topic that has only recently been 'discovered' in Japan. The form of abuse focussed on in the film, sexual abuse, remains virtually unreported in Japan. Discussion of child sexual abuse - with a father as perpetrator - is almost taboo.

Until the early 1990s, the majority of Japanese, including many professionals in child welfare, believed that in contrast to most western societies there was no, or virtually no, child abuse in Japan. Indeed, Japan was unusual in having a literature which explained why it was less susceptible to abuse than other countries due to the stability of the Japanese family, community and wider society.

In the 1990s, so-called 'traditional' family ties remained strong (60 percent of the elderly still lived with someone of a younger generation as opposed to only eight percent in the UK and 14 percent in the US). This meant not only extra hands to help but also extra eyes to detect abuse.

The system of local police boxes (*kōban*) meant a much closer relationship between members of the police force and the local community than in most western societies. The local voluntary social work (*minsei jidōiin*) system led to the belief that any abuse of children within the local community would be picked up very early by voluntary welfare workers, who were members of the same community. Teachers enjoyed high status in society and parents listened to and accepted their

advice. Schools gave regular physical check-ups to all children and insisted that parents follow up any concerns by visiting their doctors.

Others, however, explained the low rates of reported child abuse on more negative factors such as a lack of a well-articulated system of reporting and recording child abuse and a strong reluctance to get involved in the personal business of others in part, because of fears of being sued by victims' parents for defamation. Even doctors and teachers often appeared unwilling to report suspicions of abuse. Some critics suggested that the local government workers in the child welfare centres (*jidōsōdanjo*) were reluctant to seek recourse to the law for fear that a case they brought would be unsuccessful and that this might harm their future careers in local government.

Further, there was considerable evidence that the police have been reluctant to get involved in what they considered to be 'domestic disputes'. Even if the police did wish to pursue a case, it was widely recognised that the courts were reluctant to engage with issues of child abuse because of the rights afforded to parents in Japan. Although there was a provision for removing parental powers under the Child Welfare Law, even when courts placed children in child welfare institutions, parents retained the right to remove them as and when they wanted.

For a number of reasons which I explain elsewhere (Goodman, 2000), since the beginning of the 1990s there has been growing awareness of the existence of child abuse in Japan. The official number of reported cases of child abuse has grown exponentially in the past thirty years from a mere 1,100 in 1990 to over 160,000 by 2018 (Japan has a population of around 125 million.) The very low proportion of cases of *sexual* abuse in Japanese surveys of child abuse, however, demonstrates a situation which is still quite different from that in the US and UK where sexual abuse had by itself from the late 1980s become virtually synonymous with the category of child abuse. The number of cases (around 1500) defined as 'sexual abuse' in Japan has hardly changed at all in the past decade and, as overall numbers have risen, the proportion has fallen to just one per cent of all recorded abuse cases. Child sexual abuse reporting has almost always been limited to the sexual abuse of girls over the age of ten (almost always by adult men) or the forcing of children to perform obscene acts with a third party. Some have suggested that this is in part due to embarrassment at investigating suspicions and fears of stigmatising victims. Perhaps more significantly, even today, Japanese law still does not recognise incest (*kinshin sōkan*) as a crime unless the victim is prepared to press charges (which is very hard for them to do).

The situation in Japan may be changing in relation to child sexual abuse. There may be more awareness and there may be better treatment available for victims. For those subject to historical cases of abuse, like Takara, however, that would all be moot: she has been traumatised not just by the abuse but also the lack of support from her mother (who abandons her again in the film) and the system which offers no protection or therapeutic support to her when her father is released from prison. It is not surprising that she does not know how to react to Shota's obvious and genuine affection for her and resists his physical advances.

Roger Goodman, Nissan Professor of Japanese Studies, University of Oxford

Goodman, Roger. 2012. 'The discovery and rediscovery of child abuse in Japan', in *A Sociology of Japanese Youth: From Returnees to NEETs*, edited by Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto and Tuukka Toivonen, Routledge, 2012.