
6 Japanese Movies I Get Excited About

Movies that will stay with you long after the credits have rolled.

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As someone who's been an aspiring filmmaker for half a decade, I spend a great deal of time watching movies - although admittedly not as much these days, as I'm too busy off filming in a rice field. Of the many films I've watched over the years, I can honestly say I've forgotten about 75%. This isn't just due to having an awful memory (which I do), but because most films aren't particularly good or memorable. In order to truly stand out, a film needs to affect you deeply on an emotional level, which is no easy feat. And so today, I wanted to share a short list of Japanese films that can effortlessly elicit smiles, and nightmares upon recollection, in the hope you'll go off and enjoy them.

Tampopo (1985), Comedy
Director: Juzo Itami

Tampopo is one of a few films I make an effort to watch every year (along with 'Planes, Trains and Automobiles'). The film has been described as a "Ramen Western", poking obvious fun at Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western Trilogy, and it certainly feels worthy of the title. The film revolves around a widow (Tampopo) who runs a ramen shop serving below average ramen. One day two truck drivers ride into town for lunch and are left disappointed by the Tampopo's abysmally bland ramen.



Over the next few weeks, they vow to turn the ramen shops fortunes around, going to extraordinary lengths in search of the perfect recipe. Meanwhile the narrative is frequently interrupted with bizarre, seemingly unrelated scenes of people enjoying food and often in often questionable manners.

If you like ramen, food in general, western movies or the 1980's, you'll probably love this as much as I do.

Unfortunately, the film can be quite difficult to track down - tragically the director, Juzo Itami, found himself the subject of the Yakuza's wrath, after producing several films mocking the criminal organisation (FYI: probably don't do this).

In 1995, he fell to his death from a rooftop, and though it was recorded as suicide, there's evidence to suggest the Yakuza may have had a role to play. In subsequent years, his films have become difficult to find (and again, many attribute this to the Yakuza), which is an absolute tragedy. I urge you to watch and enjoy Tampopo and help keep his legacy alive. Also, you can enjoy a young Ken Watanabe, who stars alongside Tsutomu Yamazaki, an actor who'll feature in another movie on this list.

Audition (1999), Horror **Director: Takashi Miike**

Very rarely do I watch a horror film and walk away thinking "that was 2 hours well spent". Even more rarely do I watch a film and genuinely want to avoid looking at the screen. However, 'Audition' successfully fits both of those categories with flying colours.

I first watched 'Audition' at a friend's house a few years ago, going into the film with no prior knowledge other than my friend's tempting synopsis of "this film is seriously messed up, but you've got to watch it."

And messed up it certainly was.

The movie focuses on the tale of a widowed father 'auditioning' women for an acting role in an upcoming film he's producing - although secretly it's all a ruse, as he's cheekily made it all up so he can search for his ideal girlfriend.

This may sound entertaining in a "what a fucking lad" kind of way and honestly, there were times during the first act I thought it may be some kind of comedy-drama. However, soon after he meets the woman who ultimately steals his affections (although I'm not quite sure how she does), things rapidly start to become unpleasant and it turns out his dream woman is the stuff of nightmares.



Not someone you want to go on a date with.

The film is fantastically crafted, particularly with its relatively slow pacing, that comes laced with an uncomfortable sense of foreboding that many horror movies seem to neglect in favour of a never-ending amount of jump scares (although there certainly are quite a few in 'Audition').

There are many scenes in the movie that certainly won't leave your mind in a hurry; you may never look at metal wires, sacks and needles the same way again - but it'll be worth it. 'Audition' is a well crafted horror film worth watching - even if it'll probably put you off dating for a while.

Perfect Blue (1995), Psychological Thriller **Director: Satoshi Kon**

'Perfect Blue' is something of an utter mind-fuck the first time you watch it. It's one of two movies I've watched and truly had trouble following the narrative (along with David Lynch's 'Mulholland Drive'). But it makes the film all the more compelling for it, leading you to watch it over again to help unravel the mysterious narrative.

The movie revolves around Mima Kirigoe, the lead singer in an idol group who quits her group to become an actress. However, the questionable acting roles she begins to undertake (including a graphic rape scene), begin to corrupt her innocent image, leading an obsessed fan to take extraordinary measures to remedy the situation and restore her innocent image.



It sounds like a relatively thriller, but soon after Mima begins life as an actress she also begins to suffer a mental breakdown, that the audience also experiences. As the film progresses Mima's sanity is brought to question, time and reality become distorted and for the audience it becomes increasingly difficult to understand where scenes begin and end. By sharing in the nightmare, it makes the film all the more engrossing (and confusing).

Japan's idol culture makes an intriguing topic as well - especially as I've never really understood it. The subject of idols and their sometimes questionable relationship with their fanbase seems relevant now more than ever, given recent attacks on idols in public by disillusioned fans.

I can't quite put my finger what it is I like about Perfect Blue, although I suspect it's the incredible artistic direction of Satoshi Kon, who's movies are well known to have had an influence on filmmakers such as Darren Aronofsky and Christopher Nolan.

Satoshi Kon is an absolutely masterful storyteller - so much so I'm featuring another of his films below.

Fireworks / はなび (1999), Drama

Director: Takeshi Kitano

Directed by and starring one of Japan's best renown film stars, Takeshi Kitano, 'Fireworks' revolves around Police Detective, Yoshitaka Nishi, who falls into depression after his wife is diagnosed with cancer, one of his partners is killed and another becomes disabled, leading him to lose his job. Meanwhile the Yakuza keep pestering him to repay a hefty loan, eventually pushing Yoshitaka over the edge.



The explosive and violent mentality of Yoshitaka is summed up pretty well in the title of the movie, and thankfully it's often the Yakuza who experience the brunt of the fireworks, in scenes that escalate remarkably quickly.

One of the things that really stands out in the movie is the lack of dialogue; it's over 2 hours and yet, most of the scenes involve the characters sitting, walking and staring without saying a word. Yet, it makes the movie all the more powerful for it and the ultra violent bursts in between all the more shocking.

However, it's not the violence that makes the movie memorable; the lack of dialogue and slow pacing means scenes often dwell on each major character and give a sense of depth to their situations, particularly the relationship between Yoshitaka and his deteriorating wife. Their relationship is at the heart of everything Yoshitaka does - for better or worse - through the film.

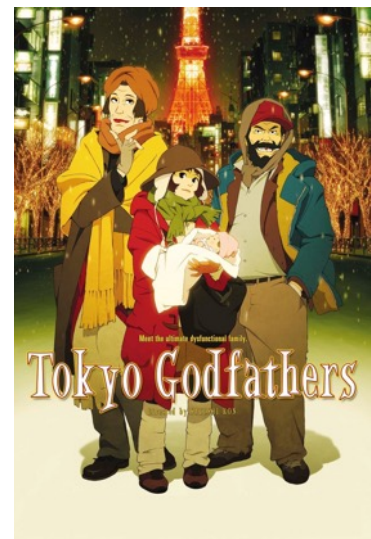
'Fireworks' feels a bit like watching a two hour poem, and culminates in one of the most moving endings I can recall watching in a film in recent years.

Tokyo Godfathers (2003), Anime Comedy-Drama **Director: Satoshi Kon**

I remember watching Tokyo Godfathers for the first time and thinking how absurd the premise of the film was. Three homeless, including a runaway teenager, a middle-aged father riddled with regret and a transgender woman who's given up life as a drag queen, stumble across a disowned baby in central Tokyo on Christmas Eve and go off an adventure across the city in search of the mother. That premise alone should be enough to make you want to watch the movie.

It's the kind of animated film you won't see Pixar making in a hurry - although after watching Tokyo Godfathers, you'll wish Hollywood start making animated films for an adult audience.

But the film is memorable not just because of the hilarious characters and their bizarre adventures, but once again thanks to the artistic direction of director Satoshi Kon, who makes every single scene pop with cinematic detail that surpasses a regular motion picture.

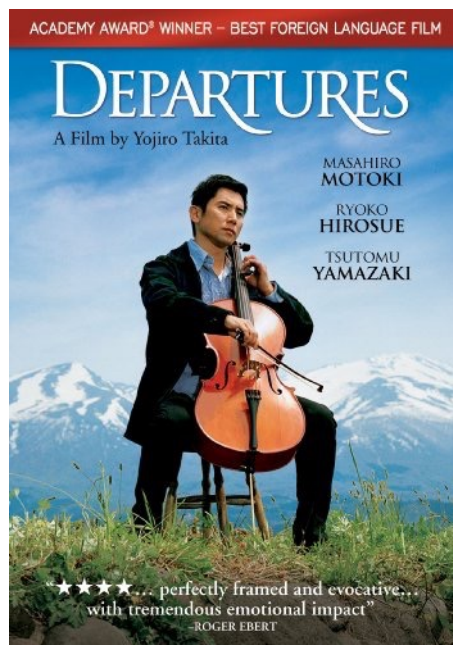


Sadly Satoshi Kon passed away in 2010, leaving behind a legacy of consistently brilliant work, which I highly recommend viewing - most notably Paprika (2006) and Millennium Actress (2001).

Departures / おくりびと (2008), Drama **Director: Yōjirō Takita**

This is my second favourite Japanese movie (after Tampopo), as it covers the theme of death and a profession that is seen as a taboo in Japan, yet it does so in an uplifting and comedic way. (And it must be good, as it was the first Japanese movie to win an Oscar, back in 2009).

When Daigo Kobayashi loses his job as a cellist in a Tokyo orchestra, he heads back to his hometown of Sakata in Yamagata - a rural Japanese town a million miles away from Tokyo. Looking for a job he accidentally starts working in the 'exciting' field of encoffining - preparing the deceased for the process of cremation. His eccentric boss is played by Tsutomu Yamazaki, the saviour of 'Tampopo's ramen shop and in all honesty, I like to pretend he's the same character at a different stage in his life, having quit work as a truck driver (although obviously there's no relation - it's just my own imagination).



As Daigo starts to find job satisfaction in his career, he also finds he's alienating his wife and friends, as it's a profession which carries a great deal of stigma in Japan, due to being seen as 'unclean'. Yet, it's through this 'unclean' job that Daigo rediscovers his humanity, forging a connection with the deceased before sending them off.

But it's not just the heartwarming story and insight into Japanese cultural beliefs surrounding life and death, that make this one of my favourite movies.

I also feel a personal, albeit coincidental connection with 'Departures', as a few weeks after watching the film for the first time in 2012, I was randomly placed to work as a teacher in the beautiful, remote town where the film was made.

It was somewhat magical knowing that the location where the film was set was the very location fate had assigned me to spend the next 3 years of my life, and a place that I now consider to be my second home.

It was quite an amazing experience to walk down the street for the first time, and plunge into the very culture I'd witnessed in the film.

It's not everyday you get to break into a movie.

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