

“Toshio Matsumoto’s *Funeral Parade of Roses* (薔薇の葬列 *Bara no Sōretsu*, 1969)”

by Alex Naylor

Funeral Parade of Roses is a rich, unique and startling cinematic experience that echoes in our sense-memory. In this mixture of intellectualism and heady sensory intensity we are invited to glimpse “the inner and outer worlds” moving through East Shinjuku in 1968. The film’s fragmentary, non-linear narrative freely mixes melodramatic intrigue, tender and intimate queer erotica, documentary and playful formal experimentation. Many of the performers were recruited from the underground scene the film depicts. The star, Peter, was scouted to the film while working as a drag bar hostess.

As we watch *Funeral Parade of Roses*, the film text invites us to situate it in multiple dimensions. We could experience and understand it as part of a specific cultural-historical moment in Japan, as part of an international movement of cinematic New Waves, as an expression of national and international political counterculture, a queer retelling of the Oedipus myth, as part of Matsumoto’s project of bringing avant-garde experimental film and documentary cinema into dialogue, as a psychedelic art experience, and as a product and depiction of Tokyo’s vibrant and precarious late 1960s queer and underground scenes.

Funeral Parade of Roses was deeply influential both within the Japanese New Wave and beyond it: the fight scenes sped up and soundtracked with cheery synth music to blackly comic effect will ring bells for anyone who has seen *A Clockwork Orange*.

By the late 1960s, Matsumoto was already a key player in the Japanese experimental film scene, and an established film theorist. His earlier shorts rehearse much of the approach to cinema seen in *Funeral Parade of Roses*. In particular, *For my Crushed Right Eye* (*Tsuburekakatta migime no tame ni/つぶれかかった右眼のために*, 1968) is a first essay at *Roses*’ subject matter and some of its style. *Funeral Parade of Roses* was Matsumoto’s first feature film, funded and distributed by the Art Theatre Guild (ATG), an independent production company which released many important films of the Japanese New Wave. The film received an American release in 1970.

Matsumoto’s filmmaking philosophy drew from the postwar theorist Kiyoteru Hanada and particularly his concept of “elliptical thinking”, in which two ideas or perspectives exist in a dynamic, dialectic relation. His earlier shorts developed his key notion of “avant-garde documentary filmmaking” (*zen’ei kiroku eiga*), which aimed to bring the “inner world” of experimental art and the “outer world” of material, political actuality into a dialogue: “to capture the so-called outer world without leaving anything out, one must capture the inner world without leaving anything out ... to document the totality of the relation between the two.”

Matsumoto’s work also sees the material and formal object of the film itself as in dialogue with its subject matter. *Funeral Parade of Roses* contains many moments where stills, freeze frames and abrupt cuts “bare the device” of filmmaking and also deliberately clash one cinematic style with another. We see this most bluntly in the counterculture filmmakers who are introduced discussing their work while we focus upon the wavy lines of their TV set as it shows, in the hazy imperfection of poor reception, a street protest. Scattered throughout the film are face-to-face interviews with the film’s performers, questioned from off camera about their experiences of gender identity and sexuality, their drug use and their opinions on the film they’re making.

This is also a film which signals its associations with an international tradition of queer art from its very first image. This opening quotation, from the French Symbolist poet and *fin de siècle* gay icon Paul Verlaine, claims the film as a new iteration of an established queer aesthetic of tragedy. The name of Eddie’s hostess

bar, the Genet Bar, also points to a rich seam of connection between the film and Jean Genet, gay writer who directed the seminal gay experimental short film *Un Chant d'Amour* (*A Song of Love*, 1950). Genet's depictions of underground gay culture, sex work and criminality, and the cinematic vocabulary of eroticism in *Un Chant d'Amour* arguably was a great influence upon the sex scenes in *Funeral Parade of Roses*: extreme close-ups of bodies in unhurried motion, our view undulating between intensely material and almost abstract.

Funeral Parade of Roses also partakes in reflexive moments which ground it within the contemporary Japanese art and filmmaking scene. Several times, we cut abruptly to self-contained scenes which are then revealed to be films within a film: a love scene turns out to be part of a porn shoot, and a series of intercut graphic stills is then revealed to be an experimental film the filmmaker is showing for a room full of sceptical friends, Eddie included. This latter scene becomes a group discussion of the aims of experimental film.

"But you must feel it with your body", remarks the character Guevara during this discussion. Matsumoto's cinema is and sensorily, haptically intense, and the intellectual and political aspects of his work are in dialogue, not hierarchy, with film-as-experience.