

Foreign devils adopted and adapted

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A CURIOUS thing about the word "experimental" is that it sometimes camouflages elements that became part of the cultural landscape long before anyone thought to invent a "progressive" esthetic. This is especially true when that esthetic is itself an exotic element, heavily qualified by another people's history.

The two-program selection of avant-garde films from Japan being shown this week and next at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto vividly demonstrates the collision of the homely penates of tradition with the foreign devils of new-fangledness. The techniques used by the filmmakers represented in this survey are all familiar from the work of Western avant-gardists, but they have been made to fit a distinctly Japanese mold — sometimes to the point of melding invisibly with formal predilections from the mainstream of Japanese tradition.

Japanese Experimental Film, 1960-1980, is a series of 20 short films selected by U.S. film historian Donald Richie for the American Federation of Arts. The films will be shown today and next Thursday at the AGO's Jackman Theatre as part of the gallery's larger series, Experimental Film from Three Continents, assembled by filmmaker Bruce Elder with the co-operation of the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre.

The nine films of the first program cover a broad technical

range, from the static-camera strategies of Sakumi Hagiwara to the brilliant serial montage of Toshio Matsumoto. The works of earlier filmmakers such as Nobuhiko Obayashi and Eiko Hosoe plainly bear the mark of the European surrealists, especially Man Ray and Dali.

Hosoe's *Navel* and *A-Bomb* (1960) is an extraordinarily rich evocation of attitudes concerning Bomb-as-Metaphor, as symbol of a decisive cultural event. Hosoe's dumb-show players cavort in stylized gestures at the edge of the ocean, on the frontier of a nuclear world separated from its past with

this series, from the Zorro clips of Takashi Nakajima's *Inside Television* (1979) to the grab-bag of aural and visual allusions of Obayashi's *Complex* (1964). Obayashi pits the stagey, street-wise choreography of *West Side Story* (a hot import in 1964) against the persona of the old-time "advanced" artist: mannered, slightly effeminate, wearing a beret. After a series of pixilated adventures (including a high-speed whiz through the streets on a pair of wooden block sandals), the professorial artist is set upon by the sashaying street toughs, who strip him to his shorts, then

The motive force behind these images, which are rendered with the lushness of high-fashion photography, is the kind of concentrated glimpse of the thus-ness of things that has been the prized currency of generations of haiku-writers. In the hygienic clarity of Hirose's images, it is possible to see the characteristic Japanese passion for purity, as well as Robbe-Grillet's conviction that nothing, ultimately, is more fantastic than extreme precision. The snail-with-razor sequence certainly is a fantastic, beautifully *loathsome* sight, open to obvious symbolic interpretation and to identification as yet another point of homage to the work of western masters — in this case, the notorious razor episode from Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*.

Most impressive, for sheer virtuosity, is Toshio Matsumoto's *Atman* (1975), a whirl of images drawn from a stationary figure dressed in traditional Japanese dress and a mask from the Noh theatre. The camera is in constant revolution in this obsessive film, which digs into every possible variation available with zoom lenses, color film and cutting-room surgery. The radial angles created and hypnotically repeated by Matsumoto's technique ultimately suggest the lines of power radiating from the terrible face of the horned mask, which becomes visually clearer even while the source of its potency becomes more obscure. Using the new demon (technology) to the full, Matsumoto succeeds in making fresh the image of the old.

Experimental films show such influences as Dali, Bunuel and Zorro on the Japanese avant-garde

almost surgical finality. The film's visual style is purged of all shadow (everything seems to have been shot at high noon), so as to draw into purer focus the ambiguous movements of the naked men and boys, whose attitudes often lie in an unnamable region between the devotional and the execratory.

The emotional climate is similarly complex, straddling both a free, "natural" immediacy and a difficult, self-imposed turning away from the immense junk-heap of the past. Hosoe's cool-jazz score flows continuously over the halting gestures of his deculturated figures, whose faces are almost always obscured.

The use of Western cultural emblems is a recurring element in

massage him gently in the manner of a squad of geishas. After all the visual allusions to Edvard Munch and Luis Bunuel (among others), it's impossible to ignore the rather corny connection with Marcel Duchamp's famous title, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*.

Very different from Obayashi's sensibility are the films of Hagiwara and Tadashi Hirose, whose *Ultramint* (1980) is a visually impeccable essay in rhythmic micro-photography. Hirose follows an associative impulse through suitably "organic" subject matter: globules in motion, the segmented skin of a snail, crawling along the edge of a straight-razor.