Looking Back and Looking Up in Postwar Japan: A Review of *Always: Sanchōme no yūhi* (2005)

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Always: Sanchōme no Yūhi *(*Always: Sunset on Third Street*)*. Directed by Yamazaki Takashi. Produced by Abe Shuji and Okuda Seiji. Tokyo: Tōhō, 2005, 133 minutes. Japanese narration and subtitles. English subtitles.

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One of the more poignant moments in *Always: Sanchōme no yūhi* (*Always: Sunset on Third Street*; 2005) comes after we learn that a side character, a physician, had lost his family in the Pacific War and, more than a decade later, still dreams about them in his drunken sleep. Upon hearing this, a sympathetic neighbor sighs, "And they say 'the postwar is over.'" That famous 1956 government proclamation notwithstanding, the postwar was not yet over, at least not quite in 1958, when this film takes place. Still, Japan then could seemingly look forward to better days ahead. Or at least that is how we now often imagine the high-speed growth era (1955-73), and *Always* is happy to affirm this standard historical narrative of postwar optimism.

The pedagogical value of this drama lies in both its content and form. In its cozy, fictional depiction of life in a Tokyo neighborhood (Atagochō, near Tokyo Tower), *Always* effectively visualizes many staples of textbooks and lectures. One example is the proliferation of mass consumer culture, as captured by the so-called "Three Imperial Regalia" of postwar materialism (i.e., television, washer, and refrigerator). Television especially, as a vehicle of mass content, helps galvanize the community. *Always* conveys a sense of ongoing physical change, and the results of that change can be verified in the classroom by comparing the dusty and woody pre-Olympics neighborhood in the film to a Google Street View of present-day Atagochō and its now typically Tokyo steel-and-concrete cityscape. Tokyo Tower, whose construction began in 1957 and grows ever taller in the course of the film, stands as an icon of irrepressible industrial expansion and lofty aspiration here. It is in the shadow of this inspiring monument that the baby boom children in the film come of age, enthralled by science fiction and dreaming of a prosperous, technologically dazzling future that they would indeed deliver in due time.

Although *Always* is set squarely in Tokyo, it does occasionally connect to the countryside and a wider Japan. It faithfully depicts "group employment" (*shūdan shūshoku*), a mid- to late-1950s phenomenon whereby rural youths headed *en masse* to Tokyo to work. One such aspiring teenager, Mutsuko, is a girl from Aomori who arrives to work at Suzuki Auto, a family-run neighborhood repair shop (a rather typical destination for these out-of-towners, who were usually shunned by larger firms). Mutsuko is presented as a wide-eyed, apple-cheeked country girl who can't quite drop her Tsugaru dialect. The film also points, if subtly, to the underbelly of Japanese society. One boy is revealed to be an abandoned son of a geisha concubine, and Hiromi, one of the main characters, has a murky past that eventually leads to life as a cabaret dancer.

At its core, *Always* is a fairly standard human drama, but it is one that feels properly historicized because the film situates itself convincingly within the greater span of the long postwar period. By invoking the dark wartime past as well as the promise of a brighter tomorrow, the film looks both backward and forward in time, thus capturing the mid- to late-1950s as the transitory moment that it was. This juicy temporal positioning is put to its best use through the salty owner of Suzuki Auto. Presumably a war veteran, Suzuki dreams of building a new Japan, often reminding others about precisely how much time has elapsed since the war. As a tellingly transwar figure, Suzuki has a complex relationship with the war. He is eager to overcome the war, and yet, in a fit of anger, also derides his younger, softer neighbor for "never having been to war."

As useful as the film's content is its form. *Always* is a good opportunity for students to consider not only "what" is being depicted, but "how." Visually, the supersaturated colors of the computer-generated landscape heighten the longing for the "good old days" of a vibrant, rather romanticized Shōwa. Both U.S. and Japanese students have characterized the film as "warm," "nostalgic," "full of hope," "optimistic," and "humane," among other similarly positive qualities. Especially idealized in their eyes are the human relationships within this close-knit community (although U.S. students are more likely to think so than Japanese students in my experience). Perhaps the intense, melodramatic neighborly interaction is part and parcel of a mainstream film like *Always*, but students could also consider reading Ezra Vogel's *Japan's New Middle Class* (1963) or Ted Bestor's *Neighborhood Tokyo* (1989), which depicts a comparable community some quarter-century later, after it has undergone high speed growth, to see what is corroborated in scholarship and what is not.

One discussion question that often yields interesting responses is "What is the meaning behind the film's title?" In other words, what is it that will "always" remain so? Whatever it may be—the answer seems to lie somewhere around familial and intergenerational bonds—what then is the relationship between that supposedly inalienable continuity and historical dynamism? (Likewise, students often make associations with the "sunset" imagery that may be worth pursuing further.) The film certainly tugs at the heartstrings; not a few students are likely to be drawn to tears. Such a tenderly rendered past might be fruitfully compared to a documentary like *The Pacific Century* series (1992), especially volume 6, which depicts roughly the same period but focuses on conflict and violence instead. What accounts for this disparity? Having students ponder various representational differences can make for a productive, nontextual, historiographical exercise.

Personally, I cannot help viewing this film as part of a larger, media-driven rehabilitation of the Shōwa postwar period that enjoyed cultural currency in the early 2000s (a development I discuss further in the forthcoming volume edited by Tim George and Chris Gerteis, *Japan since 1945: From Postwar to Post-Bubble*, from Continuum). Post-bubble Japan has enjoyed harkening back to postwar Shōwa as a golden era, and *Always* adds to this wistful remembrance of a Japan that once was and, with any luck, may yet be again.

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