

JAPAN 2020

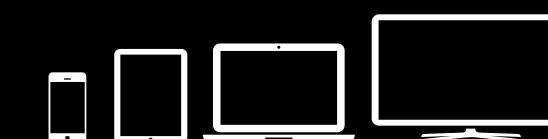
OVER 100 YEARS OF
JAPANESE CINEMA



PART 1: KUROSAWA

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JAPAN 2020

OVER 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

We have long carried a torch for Japanese film here at the BFI. Since the first BFI London Film Festival opened with Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* in 1957, we've played a vital role in bringing the cinema of this culturally rich nation to UK audiences through our festivals, seasons, theatrical distribution, books and video publishing. In this major season we spotlight filmmakers who have inspired admiration and fascination around the world. We begin our story with Akira Kurosawa, and over the coming months we'll present films from the Golden Age, a focus on Yasujiro Ozu, new wave rebels, the visionary creations of anime, the netherworlds of J-horror, and so much more from archive rarities to contemporary works and cult classics.

This landmark season will take place on BFI Player from 11 May onwards, with new online collections released each month, and we expect to present it at BFI Southbank and cinemas nationwide later this year.

The *Japanese Cinema Book*, published by BFI & Bloomsbury to coincide with the season, is out now.

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‘FILMMAKING COMBINES EVERYTHING.
IN FILMS, PAINTING, LITERATURE,
THEATRE AND MUSIC COME TOGETHER.
BUT A FILM IS STILL A FILM’
AKIRA KUROSAWA

PART 1: KUROSAWA

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This retrospective collection on BFI Player helps to confirm Kurosawa’s status as one of the small handful of Japanese directors who truly belong to world cinema, writes **Alexander Jacoby**

If Yasujiro Ozu is often called ‘the most Japanese of Japanese directors’, then one could almost identify Akira Kurosawa as the least Japanese of Japanese directors. His admiration for Western culture showed in the abiding influence on his work of foreign cinema and literature. Film historian Joseph Anderson commented that ‘without the American cinema, there would be no Kurosawa’, and Kurosawa himself acknowledged his debt to John Ford, whose example helped to shape the classical clarity and directness of the Japanese director’s most famous film, *Seven Samurai*. An admirer, too, of European literature, Kurosawa based films on works by Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and Gorky, as well as the popular American writer Ed McBain. It’s no surprise, then, that Kurosawa was the first Japanese filmmaker to achieve an international reputation, nor that he remains the most popular of Japanese directors in the west. Twenty-two years after his death and over 70 years after *Rashomon* scooped the Golden Lion at Venice, he continues to win audiences and exert a profound influence on filmmakers throughout the world.

Image: *Seven Samurai*

A KUROSAWA FOR EVERY MOOD



A Pioneering Whodunnit: *Rashomon*

(1950. See p8)

The film that launched Kurosawa (and the popularity of Japanese cinema) internationally was a multiple point-of-view story far ahead of its time. Shot and edited in just two months, it tells of a rape and murder... yet Kurosawa leaves it up to you to decide what really happened on that fateful day.



An East-set Western: *Seven Samurai*

(1954. See p9)

On the back of his *Rashomon* success, Kurosawa tackled his first samurai film, went three times over budget and created a 3.5 hour epic that would appeal to anyone who loves a western. A village plagued by bandits try to hire a band of samurai to defend them. It's about honour and selflessness, deceit and devotion – all beautifully captured in monochrome, including a climactic rain-lashed battle.



One for the Heart-strings: *Ikiru*

(1952. See p10)

This life-affirming tale, told in two parts, is about a middle-aged man (Kurosawa regular Takashi Shimura) facing the end of his days. Guaranteed to touch even the hardest of hearts, *Ikiru* follows the man on his mission to find meaning, at one point with the help of a stranger in a bar who takes him 'out on the town'.



A Crime-noir: *Stray Dog*

(1949. See p8)

Often considered Kurosawa's first masterpiece, this moody crime-noir was partly inspired by the work of Maigret author Georges Simenon. A rookie detective goes undercover in the dangerous underworld of post-war Japan in order to retrieve his stolen gun, but just how far will he go to right a wrong?

KUROSAWA COLLECTION ON BFI PLAYER



Sanshiro Sugata Sugata Sanshiro

Japan 1943. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Denjiro Okochi, Susumu Fujita, Yukiko Todoroki. 79min. EST. PG

Kurosawa's assured debut feature introduced his first hero: a feckless judo champ who discovers social responsibility and finds illumination in the lotus pond.

Little by little Sanshiro learns the truth about life and in the celebrated climax on the windswept heath he finds that strength is not enough – but that endurance is.



Sanshiro Sugata, Part Two Zoku Sugata Sanshiro

Japan 1945. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Denjiro Okochi, Susumu Fujita, Ryunosuke Tsukigata. 83min. EST. PG

After the success of the first *Sanshiro Sugata*, the government recognised its stirring potential for propaganda and ordered the production of a second. This time our wirey, wily judo champ Sanshiro takes on a massive, mindless American boxer.

Again there is a furious final fight – in the snow this time – but the interest is now not so much in our hero and his emerging conscience but in the masterful way Kurosawa deploys his pictorials.



The Most Beautiful *Ichiban utsukushiku*

Japan 1944. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Takashi Shimura, Soji Kiyokawa, Ichiro Sugai. 85min. EST. U

An artful propaganda film that anticipates the social realism of Kurosawa's post-war films, *The Most Beautiful* provides a fascinating portrait of female volunteer workers in an optics factory manufacturing lenses for binoculars and gunsights. Kurosawa takes an approved wartime theme – of personal inclination willing sacrificed for

the sake of national emergence – and turns it into a documentary on women factory workers. It is their dedication which is most beautiful, but most impressive is Kurosawa's grasp of his material, the way he makes us care about whether a lens is ground properly.

No Regrets for Our Youth *Waga seishun ni kuinashi*

Japan 1946. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Setsuko Hara, Susumu Fujita, Denjiro Okochi. 110min. EST. PG

Kurosawa's first post-war film stars Yasujiro Ozu regular Setsuko Hara as Yukie, a privileged daughter of a professor who takes a soul-searching journey through rural Japan and comes to question her values, deciding to join the fight against the state of wartime Japan.

Even now a sobering, ennobling experience, the film remains a rebuttal to those who say Kurosawa didn't understand women.



One Wonderful Sunday Subarashiki nichiyobi

Japan 1947. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Isao Numasaki, Chieko Nakakita, Atsushi Watanabe. 108min. EST. PG

Akira Kurosawa strikes an unfamiliar tone for this bitter-sweet story of young love set in the devastation of post-war Tokyo, reminiscent of Frank Capra's social realist comedies. This is a date story told entirely over on evening, much as Richard Linklater would adopt nearly 50 years later with *Before Sunrise*. Yuzo and his fiancée Masako spend a Sunday jaunting around Tokyo with only 35 cents to their names, but still

manage to have a great time despite their adversities. The message for struggling Japanese post-war audiences is plain to see, which is why the film resembles Depression-era Hollywood in its outlook of tainted optimism. Look out for an innovative instance of breaking the fourth wall in the final act.



Drunken Angel Yoidore Tenshi

Japan 1948. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Reisaburo Yamamoto, Michiyo Kogure. 98min. EST. PG

The film that inaugurated Kurosawa's long-running collaboration with actor Toshiro Mifune is also, perhaps, the first film fully to display the visual flair and dramatic intensity that would typify his best work.

Mifune's gangster and Takashi Shimura's alcoholic doctor (the drunken angel of the title) clash in the desolate slums of post-war Tokyo in this powerful thriller – downbeat yet true to Kurosawa's humanist outlook, and full of striking imagery.



Stray Dog Nora Inu

Japan 1949. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Takashi Shimura, Isao Kimura. 124min. EST. PG

Both a gripping thriller and a fascinating documentary exploration of Tokyo in the years of the American Occupation, *Stray Dog* is arguably Kurosawa's best 1940s film, and indeed, ranks with his finest work.

The story of a cop obsessively hunting the criminal who stole his gun is rooted in Japanese notions of duty and honour, but also evokes the psychological undertones of Dostoyevsky and the stylistic tropes of film noir.



Rashomon

Japan 1950. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Machiko Kyo, Masayuki Mori. 88min. EST. 12A

Famously, *Rashomon* – which won both the Golden Lion in Venice and the Oscar for Foreign-Language Film – introduced western audiences to Japanese cinema in general and to the thrilling artistry of Akira Kurosawa in particular. Likewise well-known is the fact that its story of rape and murder in 12th-century Kyoto is related in four conflicting versions, each reflecting the experience – or, more troublingly, desire for sympathy – of one of those present at the crime: a bandit (a memorably bestial Toshiro Mifune), a samurai and his wife, and a woodcutter.

But the film, with its ingeniously framed flashbacks, is considerably subtler and richer than most subsequent films demonstrating the relativity of 'truth'; it also succeeds as a caustic study of human weakness. Fast-paced, endlessly inventive (one of the flashbacks represents the viewpoint of a dead man) and visually superb, this philosophical action movie also boasts great performances from a first-rate team of Kurosawa regulars.



The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail

Tora no O o Fumu Otokotachi

Japan 1952. Dir Akira Kurosawa.
With Denjiro Okochi, Susumu Fujita,
Ken'ichi Enomoto (Enoken). 58min. EST. PG

Made at the very end of WWII, Kurosawa's lighthearted kabuki adaptation was banned during the Occupation, solely because it had been excluded from a list of films submitted to the American censors. An ironic fate, since the film subtly satirises the feudal codes promoted by the wartime government, with the values of the warrior protagonists undermined by the unheroic presence of the porter played by popular comedian Enoken.



Seven Samurai

Shichinin no Samurai

Japan 1954. Dir Akira Kurosawa.
With Takashi Shimura, Toshiro Mifune,
Yoshio Inaba, Keiko Tsushima. 207min. EST

Genuinely epic in scale and tone, Kurosawa's hugely influential samurai movie is a towering achievement.

When 16th-century farmers whose village is repeatedly attacked by merciless bandits ask an elderly, masterless samurai (Shimura) for help, offering nothing but food in return, he hesitantly agrees, and assembles a band of warriors to defend and train the villagers... Boasting terrific performances (with Shimura and Mifune, as a peasant masquerading as a samurai, particularly memorable), superb camerawork, and expertly mounted battle sequences, *Seven Samurai* is undoubtedly one of the greatest action movies ever made. Moreover, in its rich attention to detail, its vivid characterisations and its sorrowing acknowledgement of life's injustices, it recalls the profound masterpieces of Homer and Shakespeare.



Ikiru Living

Japan 1952. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Takashi Shimura, Nobuo Kaneko, Miki Odagiri. 143min. EST. PG

Never one to shy away from grand themes, Kurosawa here tackled the biggest and simplest of existential issues: the fact of mortality, and the impact that the inevitability of death has on an individual life.

A diagnosis of terminal stomach cancer forces a bureaucrat to take stock of his life, and seek some way of giving it meaning. Built around a superb central performance from Takashi Shimura, this is a classic of humanist cinema.

I Live in Fear Ikimo no Kiroku

Japan 1955. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Eiko Miyoshi, Yutaka Sada. 103min. EST. PG

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki triggered numerous responses within post-war Japanese cinema, but few as original as Kurosawa's account of an elderly man who, terrified at the prospect of nuclear holocaust, strives to persuade his reluctant family to move to Brazil.

The mood of nuclear paranoia has rarely been so powerfully caught as in this eerily reiterative portrait of obsession.



The Lower Depths Donzoko

Japan 1957. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Isuzu Yamada, Kyoko Kagawa. 137min. EST. PG

Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of Maxim Gorky's novel (previously filmed by Jean Renoir) sees the inhabitants of a slum while away their time longing for escape or dreaming of a better life. *The Lower Depths* is a brilliant exploration (no less than *Rashomon*) of the conflict between the comfort of illusion and bitter reality.

Distinguished by its sobriety, its pathos, and by the theatrical brilliance of its presentation, the film is also one of the finest examples of ensemble acting in Japanese cinema.

Throne of Blood Kumonosu-jo

Japan 1957. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Isuzu Yamada, Takashi Shimura, Minoru Chiaki. 110min. EST. 12A

A devotee of Western culture, Kurosawa here transposes *Macbeth* to Japan in its medieval period of civil war, to brilliant effect. Filming in part on the slopes of Mount Fuji and cleverly fusing Shakespeare's narrative with influences from Noh theatre and sumi-e ink painting,

Kurosawa creates a dazzling cross-cultural artefact, centred around indelible performances from a dynamic Toshiro Mifune and a chilling Isuzu Yamada.



The Hidden Fortress

Kakushi Toride no San-Akunin

Japan 1958. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Minoru Chiaki, Kamatari Fujiwara. 138min. EST. PG

An unusually lightweight film for Kurosawa, but a thoroughly entertaining one, displaying what critic Kiyoteru Hanada called 'the sparkle of an imitation jewel'. In this story of a princess and her retainer transporting clan treasures through enemy territory, Kurosawa

displays his mastery of the Tohoscope widescreen format, which he used here for the first time. It's no surprise that this action-packed romp appealed to George Lucas and helped inspire *Star Wars*.

The Bad Sleep Well

Warui Yatsu Hodo Yoko Nemuru

Japan 1960. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Takeshi Kato, Masayuki Mori. 150min. EST. PG

One of Kurosawa's most gripping films, this bleak but stylish thriller was a timely indictment of corporate and political corruption. The drama is rooted in the political turmoil of early 1960s Japan, but Kurosawa again draws on Shakespeare, echoing *Hamlet* in its story of a man prevaricating over revenge for his father's death.

A remarkable film that combines visual flair with psychological depth and razor-sharp political commentary.



Yojimbo

Japan 1961. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Tatsuya Nakadai, Isuzu Yamada, Takashi Shimura, Yoko Tsukasa, Daisuke Kato. 110min. EST. 12A

Akira Kurosawa's supremely entertaining 'samurai western' stars Toshiro Mifune at his most mesmerically charismatic. Mifune brings a raw, animal energy to his portrayal of Sanjuro, a masterless samurai who wanders into a desolate small town divided between two rival gangs,

and proceeds to play both off against each other – until events spiral into vicious violence and he must finally pick a side.

Sanjuro Tsubaki Sanjuro

Japan 1962. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Tatsuya Nakadai, Yuzo Kayama, Takashi Shimura. 95min. EST. PG

Kurosawa's sequel to *Yojimbo* was envisaged as a stand-alone samurai film, but in view of the success of the earlier movie Kurosawa was prevailed on to resurrect its main character. He crafted another blackly humorous period film, which again centres around the energy of

Toshiro Mifune's performance as a cynical masterless samurai, and the flair of Kurosawa's action sequences. A rare case of a sequel that is as entertaining as the original.



High and Low Tengoku to jigoku

Japan 1963. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Yutaka Sada, Tatsuya Nakadai. 143min. EST. 12

Based on crime writer Ed McBain's detective novel *King's Ransom*, *High and Low* is a gripping police thriller. Wealthy industrialist Kingo Gondo (Mifune) faces an agonising choice when a ruthless kidnapper, aiming to snatch his young son, takes the chauffeur's boy by mistake but still demands the ransom. Gondo, engaged in a precarious scheme to seize control of the shoe company he works for, faces ruin if he pays up. Although the film is based on the McBain novel, Kurosawa essentially takes the plot outline – a kidnapping that goes wrong and the moral dilemma it poses – and, with his scriptwriters,

turns it into something more ambiguous and complex; an anatomy of the inequalities in modern Japanese society. *High and Low* is an intricate film noir, where the intense police hunt for the kidnapper, led by the tenacious Inspector Tokuro (Nakadai), is accompanied by penetrating insight into the kidnapper's state of mind. Kurosawa's virtuoso direction provides no easy answers, and in short, intense sequences he portrays the businessman, the police and the criminal as equally brutal but nonetheless human.

Red Beard Akahige

Japan 1965. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Toshiro Mifune, Yuzo Kayama, Tsutomu Yamazaki. 179min. EST. 15

Kurosawa's long, episodic, poignant story of a 19th-century doctor working in a clinic for the poor marks the end of a major phase in his career. It was his last film starring Toshiro Mifune, his last in black and white, and his last before changing economic circumstances compelled him to seek funding either independently or outside of Japan.

At times sentimental, it nevertheless seems to sum up the humanism of Kurosawa's cinema.



Dodes'Ka-den Dodesukaden

Japan 1970. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Yoshitaka Zushi, Kin Sugai, Toshiyuki Tonomura. 140min. EST. 12

Akira Kurosawa's first colour film is an eccentric and joyous account of a group of disparate people living in a city dump. Approaching a similar milieu to that which he explored in *The Lower Depths* (1957), Kurosawa's film finds optimism, humour and musicality (the title refers to a child's onomatopoeic mimicry of a tram ride) amid the lives of the dispossessed.

Kurosawa poured himself into this film, made at a critical point in his life, and the negative reaction it garnered resulted in a suicide attempt. It's now rightfully regarded as a classic; Kurosawa's last poetic paean to post-war optimism.



Ran

Japan-France 1985. Dir Akira Kurosawa. With Tatsuya Nakadai, Akira Terao, Jinpachi Nezu. 162min. EST. 12A

This visually spectacular epic transplants Shakespeare's *King Lear* from Celtic Britain to feudal Japan. In its epic scope and expert execution, *Ran* can be seen as a culmination of the great Japanese director's filmmaking career; a late triumph which he had planned and refined over several years. By fusing the narrative – about an arrogant King who's betrayed by his resentful children – with non-naturalistic

Japanese aesthetics from the samurai epic and Noh theatre, Kurosawa crafts an arresting and singular cinematic (re)vision of Shakespearean drama. Epic and bloody spectacle is underscored by a sombre mood of loss, regret and mortality, making *Ran* both enthralling and disturbing. The film is presented here in a stunning new restoration.




Yasujiro Ozu's Tokyo Story

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Image: *Ran*

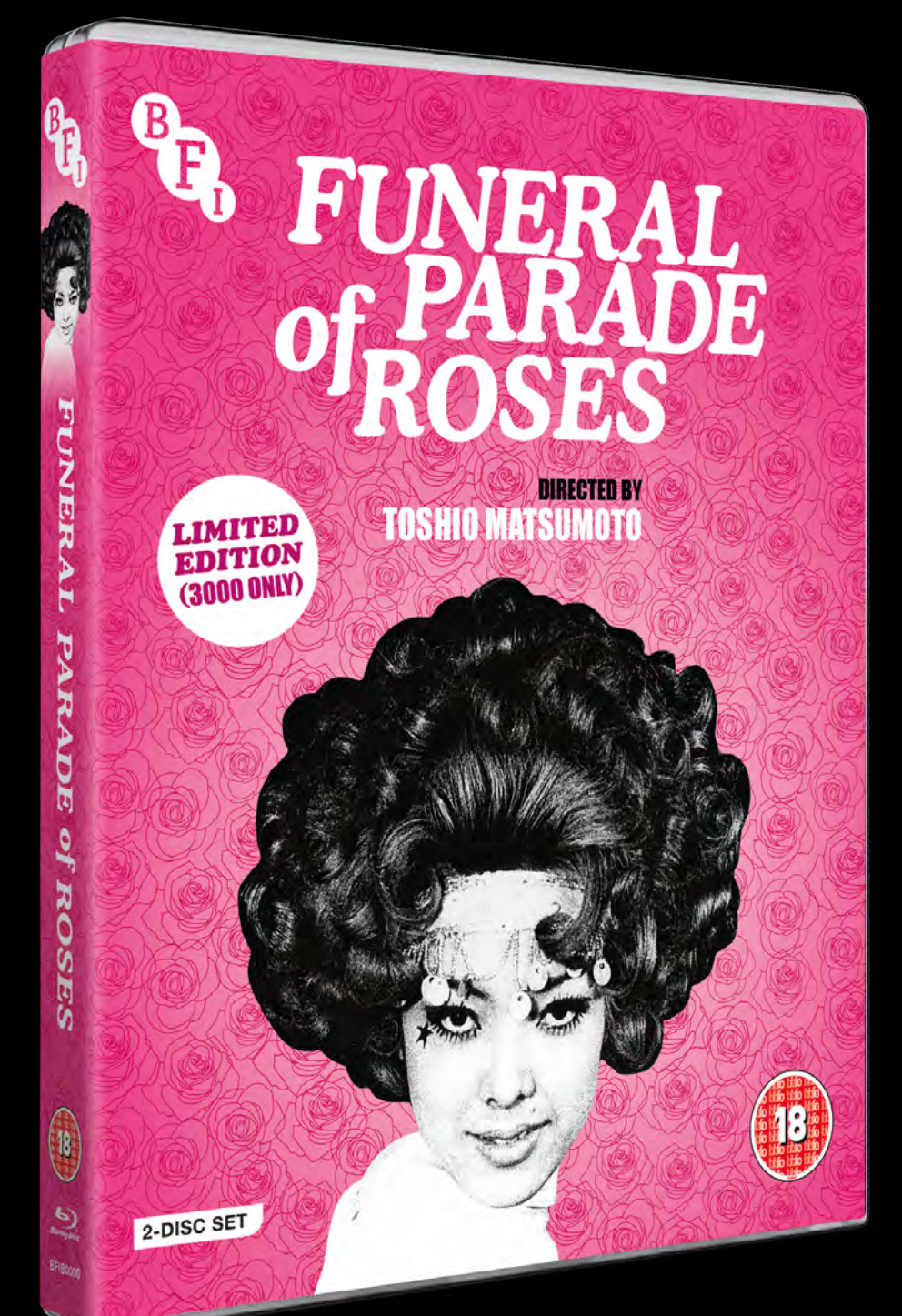
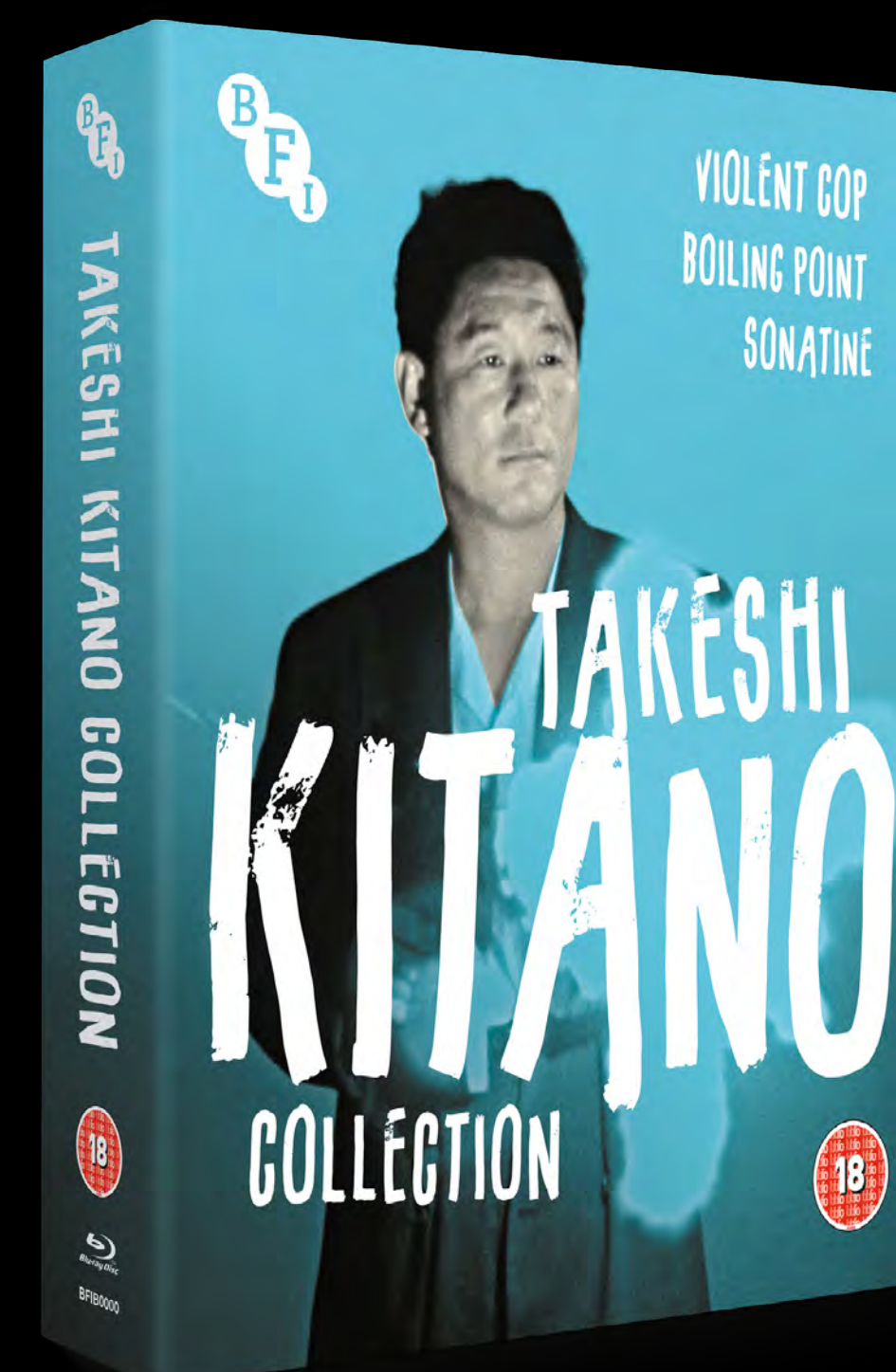
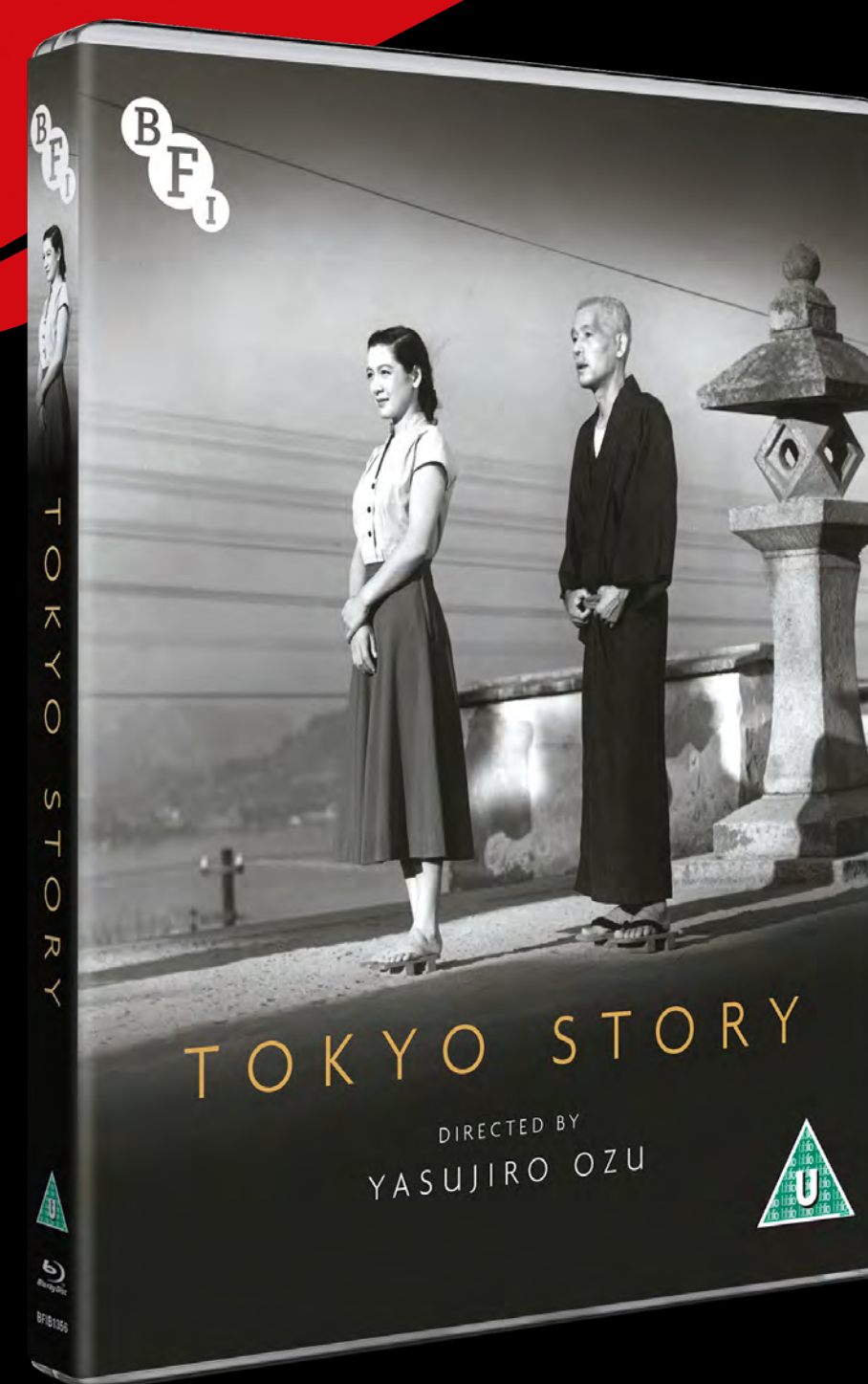
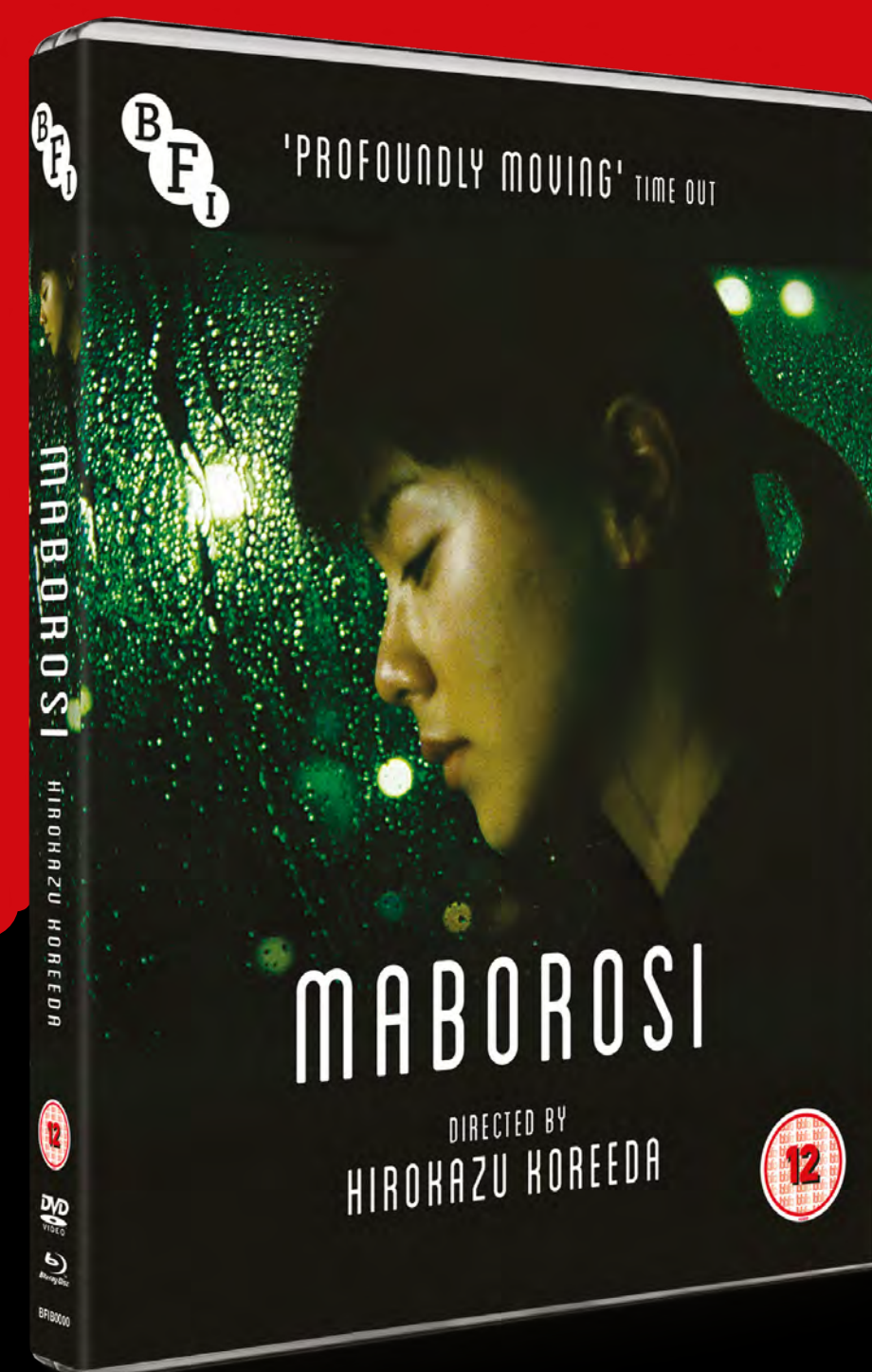
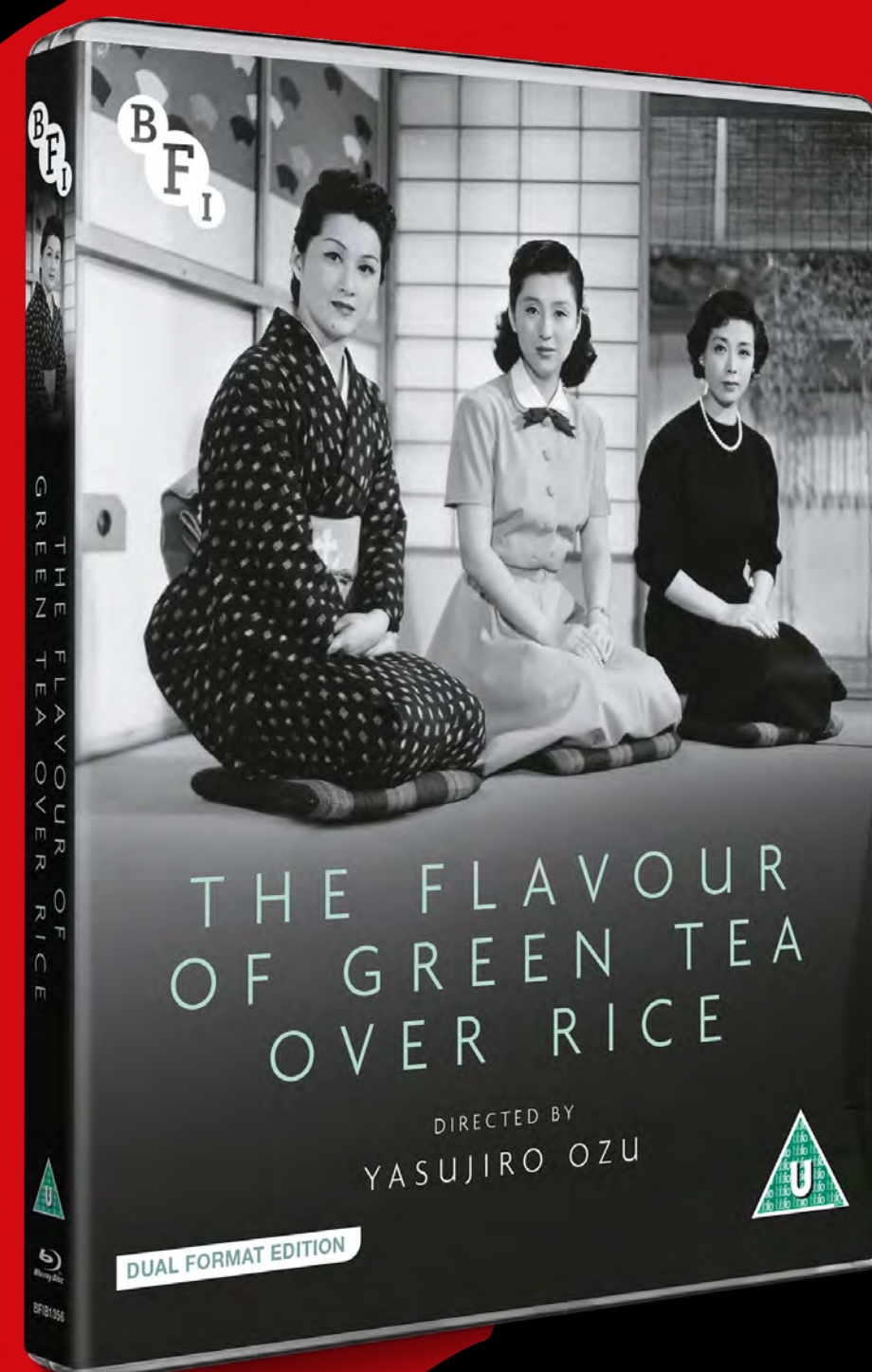
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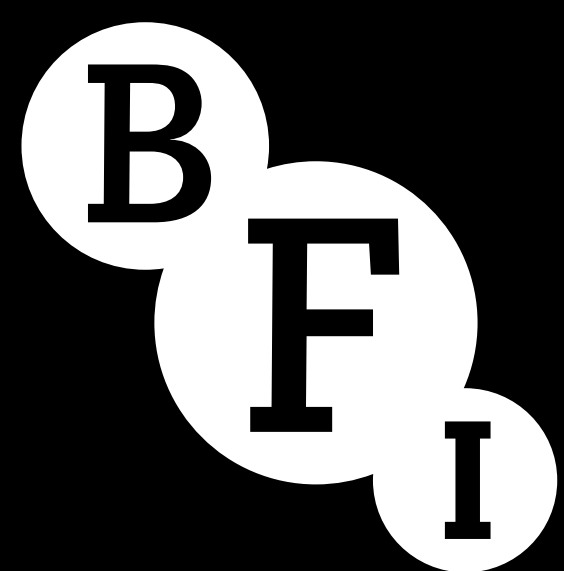
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