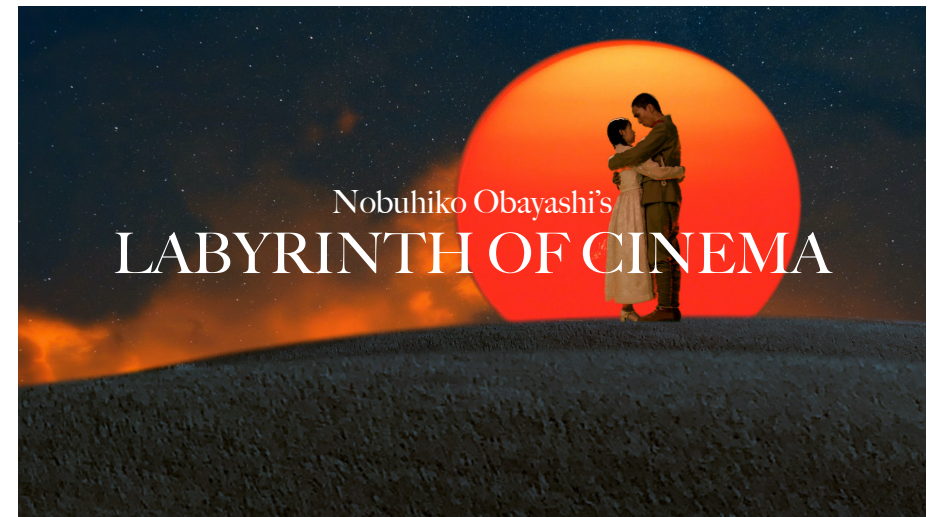


movie screen (when asked to commit various crimes against humanity, the characters repeatedly protest, “But we’re in the audience!”). All of which is to say, *Labyrinth of Cinema* has the densest diegesis of any movie made this century—save perhaps those signed by Jean-Luc Godard. Then again, *Labyrinth of Cinema* plays a but like Obayashi’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, so maybe he’s beat the somber old Swiss at his own game. (He certainly devises better directorial cameos for himself than Godard did in his personal survey of the seventh art: Obayashi as clay figure marionette; Obayashi in drag; Obayashi as John Ford. Even when he’s serious, Obayashi is never somber.) And like Godard’s magnum opus, *Labyrinth of Cinema* is haunted by the possibility that—if only things had been different, if only the movies had been more true—cinema might have altered the course of the 20th century, might have thwarted its greatest horrors. That it ultimately failed to do so is, for Godard, a source of deep sorrow—shame, even. And, like a spurned prophet, he retreated into monasticism, fled to his little tower on the shores of Lake Geneva from whence he issues the occasional gnomic utterance, if only to remind us that the world remains irreparably fallen. Obayashi, on the other hand, earnestly believes—as he himself tells us—that “a movie can change the future, if not the past.” *Labyrinth of Cinema* may be composed of bitter, inalterable histories, but it exists to shape an undetermined tomorrow.

In our age of pop culture mercenaries and arthouse careerists (neither of whom are willing to venture more than a few timid genuflections to the present, lest they be judged by history—or worse, by their peers—as credulous rubes), is there anything less fashionable than unyielding faith in the power of art to remake the world? Frankly, even a dedicated Obayashi partisan like myself finds it tough to toe the line on this point. Obayashi delivers his message with sufficient didactic force such that he overwhelms my involuntary cynicism for an hour or two, that I must concede. But needless to say, I can understand why one would remain wholly unconvinced that cinema alone will avert World War III. In truth, those of us who still frequent the movies, and who fashion ourselves knowledgeable of its history, are largely comfortable with the notion—to cite old André Bazin again—that cinema can preserve that which has been lost, and rather less sure that it can protect that which we have yet to lose. So, we can safely admire *Labyrinth of Cinema* as an attempt to keep the past alive in the present, applaud it for preserving a handful of lost film styles, a few young people sacrificed to war, and one ailing director who will all too soon succumb to his fate—and grant it little else. Or we can risk a bit of our cultivated, cinephilic sophistication and admit, as Obayashi does, that when the clouds grow dark outside, we rush back into the cinema in hope, believing—as some small part of us must always believe—that this will be the film that finally decides our future. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

The final film by Nobuhiko Obayashi finds the late director returning to the subject of Japan's history of warfare following the completion of his "War Trilogy," which ended with *Hanagatami*. On the last night of its existence, a small movie theater in Onomichi—the seaside town of Obayashi's youth where he shot nearly a dozen films—screens an all-night marathon of Japanese war films. When lightning strikes the theater, three young men are transported into the world onscreen where they experience the violent battles of several wars leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima. A breathless cinematic journey through Japan's past, *Labyrinth of Cinema* finds Obayashi using every trick in his book to create an awe-inspiring, visually resplendent anti-war epic that urges us to consider cinema as a means to change history.

179 min. | Japan | 2019

Not the Last Picture Show by Evan Morgan

The following article was originally published by MUBI Notebook, January 28, 2020

Medically speaking, *Labyrinth of Cinema* shouldn't exist. The doctors who, three years ago, diagnosed director Nobuhiko Obayashi with terminal lung cancer gave him only months to live, not enough time to see *Hanagatami*—his lifelong dream project, which was just about to begin production when he got the bad news—through to fruition, let alone sufficient time to complete a follow-up feature. But rather like cinema itself, Obayashi continues to defy prognostications of imminent death. That is not to say, however, that he's blithely unconcerned about what lies ahead: like the films that comprise his War Trilogy (which *Hanagatami* caps off, following *Casting Blossoms to the Sky* and *Seven Weeks*), Obayashi's newest work treats the continued life of the moving image as an urgent moral question. In fact, in light of the times, it might be the only question. Somewhere amid the flurry of title cards, dedications, and salutations that opens *Labyrinth of Cinema*, Obayashi cites a few lines from early Shōwa-era poet Chūya Nakahara, who in summing up the disquiet of his historical moment speaks succinctly of our own: "Dark clouds gather behind humanity." Yes, granted. What can cinema do about it?

Not much, at least if the theaters stay empty. But as luck would have it, it's a stormy night in Onomichi (Obayashi's beloved hometown, to which he's returning after a twenty-year absence) and some of the locals—with little else to do in their sleepy, rain-drenched port city—stumble into the last remaining cinema in town. The proprietress of this rickety, single-screen movie house is getting ready to bid farewell with a marathon of Japanese war films. Her theater is breathing its last; tomorrow, she closes up shop for good. The movies, on the other hand, lead a life of their own: in *Sherlock Jr.* style, a teenage girl (possibly a ghost; possibly a visitor from another planet; probably both) and a trio of

twenty-something men (a Yakuza, a bookish "movie history fanatic," and a bland boy-next-door type named "Mario Baba") get sucked into the screen, where Japan's recent past continues to play out in a perpetual present. Thus begins *Labyrinth of Cinema*'s three-hour atrocity revue: the conflagrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (and the birth and adolescence of cinema) are paraded before Obayashi's young people, who experience a variety show of imperialist violence via the movies, skipping across film styles and genres as they attempt to outrun—and even alter—history.

The premise is something like a phantasmagoric recapitulation of Keisuke Kinoshita's *Army*. Kinoshita's film was released near the end of 1944—just as the war was beginning to turn in favor of the Allies—and intended to steel the hearts of Japan's increasingly beleaguered civilian population, who might have sensed that military defeat drew closer by the day. It tells the story of one family that, with each generation, proudly offers up a fresh son to be devoured by the war machine du jour, tracing their filial sacrifices from the battles of the Meiji Restoration and on through to the invasion of Manchuria. A war parade, like *Labyrinth of Cinema*, albeit one with opposed ideological aims. Obayashi, being something of a film scholar (to date he's penned half a dozen books on the art and history of the movies, and—before his illness—he regularly prosthelytized for cinema on Japanese TV), surely knows that he's borrowing from a piece of fascist agitprop. In fact, he does so purposefully. Because while Obayashi is a staunch anti-militarist—as committed to pacifism as any filmmaker alive—he is not above a little propaganda. And if *Labyrinth of Cinema* means to do anything, it means to agitate.

In narrow aesthetic terms, it must be counted a success: the film's style is convulsive and anarchic, an overwhelming barrage of unconcealed chroma key effects, on-screen text, and digital composites that will rattle the nerves of even the friendliest viewer. *Labyrinth of Cinema* makes *Hanagatami* look positively Bazinian: Obayashi's previous film deployed many of the same techniques, but its narrative and psychological trajectories were determined as much by the realist novel on which it was based as by the free-associative logic of Obayashi's images. *Hanagatami* had through lines, complete sentences. Instead of slowing him down, illness and hastened mortality have only compelled Obayashi to push his style—with accelerating speed—towards a kind of syntactic omega point. And *Labyrinth of Cinema* is likely the final convergence, the last picture show unspooling inside a dying, movie-addled brain as it switches feverishly between half-remembered film reels and lurches towards the unknown. Was that a silent or a talkie? Was it directed by Sadao Yamanaka? Or was it Ozu? Both? The distinctions dissolve, the particulars bleed together; or better yet, they pile atop one another, like the multilayer matte effects that Obayashi deploys with escalating abandon. All movies—all movie history—playing all at once.

And so, in any given scene, our hero Mario Baba is simultaneously within the diegesis of a chanbara, say, but also outside of it as a spectator; he is simultaneously a young guy from Onomichi, but also the spectral projection of a long dead giallo director; he is simultaneously subjected to horrific, real-world violence, but also shielded from it by the