One of the recurrent themes of the Art Theatre Guild’s films of the 1960s and early 1970s was incest. In *Bara no sôretsu* (Funeral Parade of Roses, 1968) Matsumoto Toshio told a modern version of the Oedipus tale, transplanting the story into the gay subculture of present-day Tôkyô. The hero of Hani Susumu’s *Hatsukoi jigoku-hen* (The Inferno of First Love, 1968) suffers from the sexual abuse of his stepfather. In Yoshida Kijû’s *Rengoku Eroica* (Heroic Purgatory, 1970) a young girl who creeps into the life of a scientist and his wife pretending to be their daughter seduces her alleged father. The family head in Ôshima Nagisa’s masterful critique of the patriarchic family, *Gishiki* (The Ceremony, 1971), rapes his son’s bride. In Shinoda Hasahiro’s *Himiko* (1974) the prehistoric shaman empress of Japan falls in love with her brother and is killed by ruthless elders who can no longer exercise control over her. In Kuroki Kazuo’s *Matsuri no junbi* (Preparations for the Festival, 1975) the disabled Kikuo is sexually comforted by his mother, and in Terayama Shûji’s *Den’en ni shisu* (Pastoral: To Die in the Country, 1974), the story of a boy who tries to escape his mother, incest is omnipresent.

The film that treated incest in the most daring and scandalous way, however, was Jissôji Akio’s *Mujô* (This Transient Life) based on a screenplay by Ishidô Toshirô. It became an instant success and was the first film to get a wider release outside the confined circuit of ATG. *This Transient Life* was the most successful film of the early ATG years and by winning the Grand Prix at the Locarno film festival in 1970 it also earned international acknowledgement. Together with Mishima Yukio’s *Yûkoku* (Patriotism, 1966; distributed by ATG) *This Transient Life* was the most controversially discussed film at the FIPRESCI conference about “Eroticism and Violence in Cinema” in Milan in October 1970. However, for some unfathomable reason the film soon fell into oblivion and is still waiting to be rediscovered as one of the masterpieces of Japanese cinema.

*This Transient Life* tells the story of the siblings Masao and Yuri who live in a huge estate near Lake Biwa north of Kyôto. Masao refuses to go to university and is infatuated with Buddhist
sculpture. Iwashita, a student who lodges at the house, and Ogino, a young priest and former classmate of Masao, are both in love with Masao’s beautiful sister Yuri, who rejects all proposals from her parents to marry her off. One day, while being alone in the big house and playing with Nô-masks, Masao and Yuri end up in a passionate embrace. Thus starts their forbidden relation that soon bears fruit. When Yuri gets pregnant the siblings plot a perfidious plan. Yuri seduces Iwashita only to be discovered by her parents, who then force Iwashita to marry her. Masao leaves for Kyôto to become an apprentice to the famous sculptor of Buddhist statues, Mori Takayasu. He starts a relation with the much younger wife of the impotent sculptor, who secretly enjoys watching them make love. A year later Masao briefly returns to his parents’ house. He and Yuri resume their forbidden relation. When Iwashita accidentally witnesses them he despair and commits suicide. Takayasu’s son Takahiro meanwhile is unable to bear the indecorous relation between his father, his stepmother and Masao. He seeks advice from his friend Ogino, who is repulsed by Masao. Ogino had known about the incestuous relation of Masao and Yuri all along and can no longer bear Masao’s immoral behavior. When he takes Masao to task he is shocked by his callousness. Masao’s denial of all he had believed in plunges Ogino into deep self-doubt. A few days later Takayasu dies after finishing a statue of Kannon, the goddess of mercy. Takahiro, who himself has started a sexual relation with his stepmother, holds Masao responsible for his father's death and his own misery. In a graveyard near Ogino’s temple, where the statue is erected, he attacks Masao with his father’s chisel, but he himself is lethally wounded and di. Masao hears the voice of an old woman and enters into another world.

Jissôji Akio began his career in 1961 as a TV director for Radio Tôkyô (the later TBS). His encounter with Tsuburaya Eiji, the master of special effects and “father” of Japan’s most beloved monster, Godzilla, resulted in the TV series Ultraman, Ultra Seven and Operation: Mystery! (Kaiki daisakusen), which established Jissôji’s reputation and became cult series up to this day. In 1969 Jissôji left TBS, founded his own production company and made the 43-minute long Yoïyami semareba (When Twilight Draws Near), based on a script by Ôshima Nagisa that was originally written for a TV feature for Tôkyô-TV. The film was released by ATG together with Ôshima’s Shinjuku dorobô nikki (Diary of a Shinjuku Thief, 1969). ATG subsequently produced Jissôji’s following films, starting with This Transient Life. Together with Kuroki Kazuo and Terayama Shûji he became ATG’s most important director of the 1970s.

This Transient Life is remarkable in several ways. Jissôji employs a very unique film language with daring camera angles and breathtaking camera movements. The camera seems never to stand still but is constantly in motion. The restlessness of the pictures corresponds with the transience of life that gives the film its title: mujô is a Buddhist term that refers to the belief that nothing in this world lasts forever, but that everything is transient and fleeting. The film title refers to a quote from the Shôbô genzô, the late writings of the medieval Zen priest Dôgen (1200–1253). According to the philosopher and scholar of medieval Japan, Karaki Junzô, this belief formed the basis of Japanese aesthetics as described in the writings of the Zen priest Dôgen and other medieval philosophers. Jissôji, who was strongly influenced by Karaki and his interpretation of traditional Japanese aesthetics, tried to find a filmic equivalent to this transience.

At the same time, he deals with other philosophical questions as well. In the climactic confrontation between Ogino and Masao, Masao rejects Ogino’s moral objections and refuses to believe in the existence of good and evil and the salvation of men. He has already reached a higher level of consciousness that finally enables him to enter a world beyond our perception. There he meets an old woman whom he helps excavate and carry away a giant fish that contains stones with the names of all people. This fish can be interpreted as a symbol for the impurity that is inevitably inherent in man.

This Transient Life is a rare example of a successful film about Buddhist thought. Despite the
scandalous story, the film treats the topic with the utmost sincerity, without retreating to esoteric kitsch or religious mumbo jumbo. Jissôji, himself the descendant of an old Buddhist family, continued to tackle religious and philosophical topics in his subsequent films, among them Mandara (Mandala, 1971) and Uta (Poem, 1972), both produced by ATG and based on screenplays by Jissôji’s congenial partner Ishidô Toshirô. Jissôji’s concern with Buddhist thought can also be seen in his popular films. The Buddhist notion of salvation clearly reverberates in the Ultraman series, in which the supernatural hero from outer space rescues men from forces that want to destroy the earth.

Jissôji Akio’s importance for Japanese cinema can be compared to that of Christian directors like Carl Dreyer or Robert Bresson for European cinema. But whereas Dreyer and Bresson are luminaries on the cinematic firmament, the star of Jissôji Akio still shines in the hidden.

Roland Domenig