Word and Image in Japanese Cinema

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Word and Image in Japanese Cinema examines the complex relationship between the temporal order of linguistic narrative and the spatiality of visual spectacle, a dynamic that has played an important role in much of Japanese film. The tension between the controlling order of words and the liberating fragmentation of images has been an important force that has shaped modern culture in Japan and that has also determined the evolution of its cinema. In exploring the rift between word and image, the essays in this volume clarify the cultural imperatives that Japanese cinema reflects, as well as the ways in which the dialectic of word and image has informed the understanding and critical reception of Japanese cinema in the West.

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Carole Cavanaugh is assistant provost and director of the Center for Educational Technology at Middlebury College. She has published widely in the areas of Japanese literature and film. Her most recent work is a study of Mizoguchi's *Sansho Dayu* in the British Film Institute Film Classics Series.

Contributors

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Foreword

Outside Views of the Japanese Film

Donald Richie

All Western views of the Japanese film are, by definition, outside. What I want to do is to put them in some sort of order and show how the methodologies have varied, how the focus has shifted, and how reflexive these outside views have proved.

Sergei Eisenstein, in a 1945 essay quoted by James Monaco, devised an analogy for film scholarship. First, there is the long shot, which sees in films political or social implications; second, there is the medium shot, which focuses on the human scale of the film; and finally there is the close-up, which breaks down film into its elements, attempts to treat it as a language, and so on. Whether Eisenstein intended these stages to be read chronologically or not, his paradigm has proved fairly accurate – certainly so far as Western scholarship on Japanese film is concerned.

All of this scholarship is postwar, and its beginnings are in the 1950s with the work of Marcel Guiglaris, of Joseph L. Anderson, and of myself. These first works were very much of their time. They were all in long-shot, as it were.

Our methodology was also of its time. Both Anderson and I followed a main tradition of American criticism that was to see films not as products of authors, or of a structure approaching a language, but as evidence of social, cultural, and political movements. The model in our book was Lewis Jacobs: his work on the American cinema. Like him, we saw our field as culturally specific, yet our bias was toward synthesis rather than analysis, because we emphasized cultural values that Japan and America shared.

As Bela Balazs saw this is the basis of much early film appreciation. One perceives a common reality and this is judged as to its fidelity. The

assumption is that film exists in the context of the world around it. It stems from reality.

Thus, whatever form cinema may take, it must obey the rule of its content. This is also an assumption of Siegfried Kracauer and it was widely shared by film scholars of the period. Film is not therefore a purely aesthetic object. Film is ruled by the reality it presents.

This was a view at the time accepted by a majority of film scholars, including those interesting themselves in Japanese cinema. Japanese reality was the source, and the virtue of the Japanese film lay in its fidelity. Ethics, and a resultant kind of humanism, became paramount to judgment. Later film theory was to considerably enlarge this notion.

J. Dudley Andrew has suggested this growth by indicating two categories that reflect the famous paradigm of the dichotomy between the early cinemas of the Lumière brothers on one hand and of Méliès on the other. Theories which celebrate the raw materials, what is seen, are essentially realist, and are for that reason *representational*. Theories which celebrate what is done with the materials are expressionist/impressionist, and are for that reason *presentational*.

A major contribution to film scholarship was an enlargement of the presentational idea and the assumptions of authorship as a means of codification. This perhaps marked the entry of Eisenstein's medium shot into the history of film theory – though he might have been surprised at the turn taken by his thoughts "on the human scale."

François Truffaut's *politique des auteurs* was the earliest and the most comprehensive indication that a different way of regarding film had evolved. Though André Bazin said that this theory consisted merely of choosing the personal in artistic creation as a standard and then assuming that it progressed, the theory did indicate that film was the product of an author, that it was not reality itself; nor was it an impression nor an expression of reality, but was rather the statement of an individual.

This was understood among scholars of the Japanese film as elsewhere and, since the move from the long shot to the medium shot seemed a natural one, there soon appeared a number of monographs on various directors, my own contributions included.

This also, in Japanese cinema studies as in all national-cinema studies, led to a strengthening of the idea of a pantheon, of a privileged few directors who best exemplified the ethics of this new theory. It also moved the discussion from the culture-specific to the person-specific.

The shortcomings of strict authorial theory also indicated one of the dilemmas of film theory in general. This is the contrast (noted earlier by many theorists) between the practical, which is film criticism, and the ideal, which is film theory. The former is descriptive in that it states what film is, and the latter is prescriptive since it indicates what film should be.

Descriptive writing on film is deductive; the writer examines and then draws conclusions. Prescriptive writing is inductive, the theorist deciding upon a system of values and then measuring the film against the system.

This is a dilemma because the dichotomy divides the field. At the same time, those who see in a divided field an answer to a further dialectic need not find this a dilemma at all. In any event, cinema was evolving a theory.

A question not often addressed is why it would want one. One theorist who asked this question was Christian Metz, who said that it was the function of theory to rescue film. If the cinema could support a system of theory, then it was just as respectable as the other arts, and indeed approached the theoretical ideal of a science. Such was necessary because cinema, the youngest art, suffered, said Metz, from an inferiority complex. With the explication of contemporary theory it need do so no longer. Prescriptive theory, though often needlessly elaborate and sometimes pretentious, served the need.

Models, linguistic and otherwise, were searched for and found, and film as language became an object for study. Eisenstein's close-up had been reached. Cinema was examined and its parts were analyzed. A system good enough for common use was discovered or constructed: structuralism provided the means for a study of the parts of film and their resulting whole.

The major approach in regard to Japanese film was that of Nöel Burch, though he considerably modified accepted structural theory in order to incorporate his own conclusions. His example also indicates the strengths of the structural approach. While remaining culturally specific he could still fit Japan into the frame of international cinema.

Basing his research upon the five information channels detailed by Metz – visual images, print or graphics, speech, music, and noise – he, in the first half of *To the Distant Observer*, defined Japanese cinema in a new and valid way. With Barthes as a pilot, he described a cinema that could be discussed in terms of signified and signifiers, of syntagma and

paradigm, of the denotative and the connotative, and, at the same time, be seen as culturally specific, as Japanese.

And it is certainly true that in Japanese film the denotative quality causes no problem. A *torii* gateway is a *torii* gateway, recognizable. The connotative quality, however, is another matter. This is the meaning attached to the image. And it is often one that the foreigner cannot, for cultural reasons, decipher. The *torii* suggests a complex of associations not available to the foreign viewer without prior study.

Further, a point that Eisenstein himself brought up: a word is a word and a picture is a picture. Cinema may well have no language, but a *kanji*, a Chinese character, is still part word and part picture. In this sense it is what it means: in a way it is both signified and signifier.

Japanese film thus offers interesting challenges to the structuralist. Just as cinema was to be delivered from any indebtedness to sociology, anthropology, even history, now it could be seen as a closed system within itself – if the proper grids were used. In extreme cases what the film said was of small importance as compared to the way in which it said it. Content, which had been the major concern of earlier theory, was now sacrificed to the needs of form.

Of course, even to speak of form and content is to suggest a dichotomy that can barely be said to exist outside the Western world. (And even in this world as well, though David Bordwell has forever cleared up that matter by declaring – apropos of Ozu – that "the work's material [content] is what it is made out of; the form is the process and system of the making.")

Equally, to apply grids whether they are appropriate or not can falsify. In the Burch work, for example, both structuralist and Marxists grids were rigorously applied, though they eventually proved inappropriate to the connotations of the Japanese film.

One of the reasons is that the syntax of film is the result of its usage, not a determinant of it. Nothing is preordained. It evolves through use. And there are major differences that the rigors of an exact science may perhaps capture, but that an art cannot. Can then, the theorist must now ask, Western and Japanese syntaxes be profitably compared, and if so, to what extent?

There are difficulties and the largest is, perhaps, the one most ignored. Individuals take different approaches to Japan. These differences are due to disciplinary, personal, historical, and other factors. If we are creatures

of our culture (as cultural anthropology tells us we are), then scholars of different cultural backgrounds manifest different ways of thinking that cause them to interpret differently.

Cultural forces shape scholarship on Japan through intellectual styles unique to the country and/or language area of the scholar. This is obviously true but there is a resistance on the part of academics to think of themselves as creatures of their culture. They like to think of themselves as free agents and to consider themselves to be above cultural restraints. Yet they are as much creatures of culture as everyone else.

To take but one example: the unnoticed impact of ideology. Russian-academic Japanese studies in general deal mainly with trade unions, labor movements, etc., topics important to the Marxist socialist approach and to the theory of historical materialism. American Japanese studies, on the other hand, stress the pragmatic, the democratic. The large number of monographic studies of rural communities is plainly the product of Anglo-American functionalism. It has, for example, never been fully adopted by French students of Japan. They are concerned with more theoretical and structured investigations. And so on.

In addition, scholarly endeavor often takes a further reflexive shape. The scholar looks at his subject as other -- other, that is, than himself. Yet, taking Japan as the other really has less to do with who the other is than with the identity of the subject gazing at this other. The reason that otherness is an issue is that the viewed other is not an objective reality. Rather, it is an image, a perception that is subjectively constructed by the beholder on the basis of past background and experience rather than an objective account of any found reality.

A neglected writer on Japan, Helen Mears, underlined this in the title of her finest book, *Japan: Mirror for Americans*. When Anderson and I attempted to find ethical realism in Japan, and to define a democratic Japanese humanism, we were, despite our familiarity with Mears's work, drawing our own portraits as well as those of the Japanese filmmakers we wrote of.

One thus returns to definitions of reality, to questions pondered by Kracauer, by Bazin, by many other film theorists. The answers to these questions keep changing and this in part accounts for the richness of continuing film theory.

Godard, for example, feels that any language of film is debased by being manipulated into a false mirror of reality. It must be presentational

rather than representational. It cannot, he holds, truly reproduce reality but it may be able to honestly reproduce itself.

This pregnant idea is quite applicable to such an overtly presentational cinema as that of the Japanese. As is Godard's later suggestion that the tension between mise-en-scène and montage is a major axis in the dialectic of film aesthetics. The one, as a modification of space, asks us questions we must answer. The other, as a modification of time, presents us with conclusions we must test. Together, they aim to discover, suggests Godard, a psychological reality that transcends physical, plastic reality.

Eisenstein would certainly have agreed since he held that it was necessary to destroy "realism" in order to approach reality. Film is not, he would have said, about the artist's relationship with his materials but about his relationship with his audience.

One finds these new concerns now in the works of several later writers on Japanese cinema, particularly the detailed and original work of David Bordwell, and especially his fine study of the poetics of Ozu. One also finds much else as well in these later writers on the Japanese cinema, and if I have not touched upon these further methodologies, it is because I have attempted to present this background in broad strokes, and to suggest directions that I feel have already been most beneficial to the study of Japanese cinema.

Nor have I touched upon theoretical writings by the Japanese themselves. For one thing, that is not my subject, and for another, this work, except for the occasional essay by Satō Tadao or by Hasumi Shigehiko, is not available to the general student of cinema.

Japanese film as an eminently presentational form of cinema is now being studied by a number of younger scholars. The culturally specific is being examined with a sharper focus than ever before as methodologies grow more subtle and more versatile. It is from this work that later general opinion will come, and through this new scholarship that the future audiences of Japanese film will be informed.

Introduction

Carole Cavanaugh and Dennis Washburn

> I was probably five or six when I saw a moving picture for the first time. I went with my father, if I remember rightly, to see this marvelous novelty at the Nishuro in Okawabata. The motion pictures were not projected on a large screen as they are nowadays. The size of the image was a rather small four-by-six feet or so. Also, they had no real story, nor were they as complex as films are these days. I remember, among the pictures that evening, one of a man fishing. He hooked a big one and then fell head over heels back into the water. He wore some kind of straw hat, and behind the long fishing pole he held in his hand were reeds and willows waving in the wind. Oddly enough, though my memory may be wrong, I fancy the man looked something like Admiral Nelson.
>
> – Akutagawa Ryûnosuke, *Tsuioku* (Memoirs, 1926)

In February 1897 both the Lumière brothers' Cinématographe and Edison's Vitascope arrived in Japan along with programs of short films. These moving pictures, generally no more than one minute long, were shown at venues like the Nishuro, halls for scientific displays, public meetings, and art exhibitions. Films were thus initially presented in Japan as a commercial spectacle, an educational experience, and a demonstration of the unprecedented capacity of technology to reproduce the real.

The near-simultaneity in the introductions of the cinema to Europe, the United States, and Japan was to have a marked effect on the generation that came of age in the 1910s and 1920s. Technology seemed to have neither owners nor antecedents, for the reality it represented boasted no genealogy and claimed no privileged cultural place. The fascination of

Japanese audiences for the apparatus of the motion picture, as much as for the images it projected, was not at all different from the curiosity of European spectators who checked for water or a mirroring device behind the screen after they viewed the Lumière film *A Boat Leaving Harbor.* Men and women of Akutagawa's day grew up with the sense that science and technology outpaced the traditions of Japan with little more speed than they did those of Europe.

The childhood memory of a writer whose work epitomizes the self-conscious, edgy attitude of Japanese artists in the early decades of this century provides an appropriate starting point for a consideration of the cultural importance of the cinema in Japan. Akutagawa's description of the program he viewed crystallizes not only a defining moment in his own psychological and artistic development, but a threshold experience for Japanese audiences at large. "Suddenly it was everywhere; it swept away all else," wrote Kubota Mantarô, and its sweep was not just geographical. Cinema was an index of the interpenetration of cultural forces that shaped the first wave of globalism a hundred years ago. The presence and availability of motion pictures transformed Tokyo into a city where the modes of presentation exchanged by popular and elitist art forms were redistributed as the new currency of modernity, a cultural movement that, unlike European modernisms, drew upon realism for its intellectual authority as well as for its mass appeal.

The privileging of cinematic realism over illusion resonates strongly in the way Akutagawa's memory ordered his recollection. In spite of his assertion that the film "had no story," he dwells on its narrativity. It is evident in his description that the film he remembered was a work of realistic narrative fiction, internally edited by a storytelling structure that ensured the coherence and temporal movement of its content. As others have noted, though the film consists of a single one-minute shot, the camera achieves narrativity through the editing choices it makes in where to begin, when to end, and what to record. In such short "realist" films the camera does not accidentally capture an actual event, but records a staged fictional sequence. Though simple, narrative is fully in place.

Narrative, however, is not the lone element at work. The short film Akutagawa remembers also commands his attention as spectacle, a novelty to be described not just for its content but for its surprising presence in the world. Without the procedures of editing that soon became stan-

dard – procedures that naturalized narrative at the expense of spectacle – the fishing film naively balances both story and the eye-catching power of the attraction in which it is contained. That equilibrium allows Akutagawa to relate the sequence of actions in the film while claiming that it has no story. The fishing film is both narration and spectacle, a phenomenon of early motion pictures Tom Gunning identifies as the cinema of attractions, preserved in Akutagawa's account as an interplay of word and image.

A key point in Akutagawa's recollection is that the film succeeded in disguising its fictionality from his view. He is impressed by the accumulation of quotidian details that surround and define the subject: the straw hat, the fishing pole, the hooked fish, the reeds and willows in the background. The technology responsible for the illusory wonder of the film is passed over in favor of its circumstantial realism. What Dai Vaughn terms the transcultural standard of pictorial representation is at work in Akutagawa's description; the natural incidentals that confirmed the reality of the scene arrested the wonder of viewers with equal force across divergent cultures. The response of the first film audiences confirms the cross-cultural power of mimetic aesthetics, a radically different form of performance and representation for the Japanese viewer. Film marshaled the natural and material world to project the subject within narrative as real, as no longer a construction in poetic words, masks, or theatrical make-up.

The authority of resemblance goes even further in its demand for subject identification. Akutagawa's recollection that the filmed man looks like Admiral Nelson demonstrates the mind's struggle to reconcile what it knows to be false with what it perceives to be real. Realism insists so strongly on identification that memory has not only supplied an identity, but it has also chosen a representative figure of Western imperial power. The mention of Nelson seems to concede that with film a foreign kind of vision, one that presents itself as natural and universal, has colonized the mind. Akutagawa was astonished not by the moving picture's power to deceive, but by its realistic transparency. He understands the film to be at once familiar and exotic, ordinary and marvelous, but not illusory as well as real, only real.

It is important to keep in mind that Akutagawa's remembered account is presented to us in the 1920s after many of the formal conventions of the Japanese cinema – especially the use of the *katsuben*, a film explainer