Mediators of Modernity: "Photo-interpreters" in Japanese Silent Cinema

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The film critic and theorist Kaeriyama Norimasa,[1] writing in the trade journal *Kinema Record* in August 1915—for the benefit of foreign readers he wrote in English—, defines the role of *benshi/katsuben* as that of "photo-interpreters." The case of the *benshi* thus provides an excellent example of the processes of modification and alteration to the introduction of new technologies, and the adaptation of local populations to the accompanying introduction of new worldviews.

In this article I shall explore two avenues of thought in relation to the role played by the *benshi* in the history of early Japanese cinema. First, following on from Kaeriyama Norimasa, I shall argue that the *benshi* functioned as mediators of modernity through their interpretation of foreign films for Japanese audiences. Second, I shall explore their role within the domestically produced melodramatic genres (*shinpa*-derived traditions of "women's weepies" and the *matatabimono* "men's weepies") as vehicles through which characters were given a greater sense of psychological depth, while exploring how their inclusion as a central element in the film experience impacted the development of cinematic conventions in these genres. For the discussion of narrational norms and the *benshi* within the melodramatic traditions of early cinema, I have drawn heavily on a set of video releases of Japanese films covering the decade from the mid-1920s to

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[1] The article is in fact attributed to "a bystander." However, it is reasonably safe to assume that it was written by Kaeriyama Norimasa (1893-1964). Kaeriyama was an intellectual who had graduated from the Tokyo Engineering University (Tokyo Kōtō Kōgyō Gakkō), wrote extensively on cinema, from aesthetic questions through to ventilation systems for film theaters. In 1917, after an extensive study of American sources, he published a book entitled *The Production of Narrative Cinema and the Laws of Photography* (*Katsudo Shashingeki no Sōsaku to Satsuei*). That same year he began working for Tenkatsu Film Company in the import department. Tenkatsu was at the time experimenting with the production of Japanese films for export.

the mid-1930s produced by the Matsuda Film Company (Matsuda Eiga-sha) in the early 1990s. These releases come complete with *benshi* narration by Matsuda Shinsui (1925-1987) and Sawato Midori.

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> The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of [the] sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form (Sontag 1983:103).

While I do not want to take an overtly technological determinist line, there are various implications that need to be considered in relation to cinema as a western technological invention, and the historicity of the juncture in time when it was invented. Cinema began in the age of Freudian psychoanalysis, which also saw the rise of nationalism and the emergence of consumerism. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1996:152) remind us,

> the first film screenings by Lumiere and Edison in the 1890s closely followed the "scramble for Africa" that erupted in the 1870s, the Battle of "Rorke's Drift" (1879) which opposed the British to the Zulus . . . , the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, the Berlin Conference of 1884 that carved up Africa into European "spheres of influence," the massacre of the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890, and countless other imperial misadventures.

Relatedly, Comolli[2] has argued that the development of the camera obscura as a "machine" is not neutral, but comes imbued with certain ideological assumptions that underpinned its development (Bordwell, Staiger, et al. 1999:250): "[T]echnology is produced in large part by a socially derived conception of [the] world and how we know it . . . [Comolli] finds the origin of cinema not in scientific inquiry but in nineteenth-century

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[2] I am very much aware of the fact that Bordwell (1997) in his study of film style has found "empirical inaccuracies and conceptual shortcomings" in Comolli's analysis of depth of field and codes of "realism." As he explains (162): "However we conceive of linear perspective, we can go on to ask what *alternative* system of representation the camera could have produced. It is one thing to say that orthodox cinema reproduces only one conception of reality; it is something else to show that there are other realities to which cinema, or other media, could give access." However, I would suggest that Comolli's main premise—that the development of technology, in this case photography and cinema, grew out of the particular "realist" vision of western science and philosophy—is in fact correct. As I argue elsewhere (2005) the Japanese did produce other media, such as the screen and hanging scroll, that depicted an alternative "realist" perspective commensurate with an eastern-derived worldview.

ideological pressures to represent 'life as it is' and in economic desires to exploit a new spectacle." This desire, to represent "life as we know it is," stems from the Renaissance project that attempted to reproduce "reality" through mimesis. The invention of the camera and the development of photography was a direct result of this aim, an aim compatible with a western ideological/aesthetic tradition, which, since the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment, sought to distance humanity's understanding of the natural world and civil society from a purely metaphysical and religious context, and to locate that understanding in the "real," this worldly study of the "sciences." As the landscape painter John Constable remarked, "painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature" (quoted in Ernst Gombrich 1996:29). The development of the camera was a progression in this ideological/aesthetic tradition that pursued art as "science." This development freed artists from the need to represent "reality" and can be related to the reactionary development of expressionist and impressionist art movements of the twentieth century. The transference of the drive to (re)present "reality" to the world of film extends to the presentation of "historical authenticity" as Anthony Smith reminds us in his study (2000) of the relationship between historical paintings and historical films.[3]

Comolli's analysis of "deep focus" clearly links the development of camera lenses to western "pictorial, theatrical and photographic" codes and representational styles (1986:433). The lenses and focal lengths (f35 and f50) selected were those that clearly corresponded to "normal vision" (1986:433):

> These lenses themselves were thus dictated by the codes of analogy and realism (other codes corresponding to other social demands would have produced other types of lenses). The depth of field which they allowed was thus also what authorized them, was the basis for their utilization and existence. It wasn't therefore just supplementary effect whose use could be passed up as a matter of indifference. On the contrary, it was what *had* to be obtained, and it had been necessary to strive for its production.

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[3] "A . . . passion for archaeological fidelity in rendering period accessories became a staple of Hollywood epics. Biblical, Greek, Roman, medieval, Tudor, Stuart, Georgian and Victorian costume and furnishings became the distinguishing features and hallmark of the 'real' historical epic, sometimes requiring considerable research, as for the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. Eisenstein's enthusiasm for authentic recreation of period furnishings, costume and armour was perhaps even greater" (Smith 2000:54). Mizoguchi is similarly renowned for his research on the Genroku period (1688-1704) and the demands he made on set designers and carpenters for authenticity in his epic *Genroku Chūshingura* (1941-42).

Since the Japanese in the early days of cinema were dependent on the importation of film stock, cameras, and projection equipment from the west, it follows that they were constrained by the ideological motivations that led to the development and use of specific technologies and the rejection of others. As the reminiscences of Ōbora Gengo (1899-1975),[4] a cameraman working in 1912, confirm, the imported film stock from the United States relied heavily upon natural light and the best lens to use with this stock was f35 (quoted in Satō 1995:51).

Comolli tackles the question of the relationship between cinematic style and technological innovation from the ideological or collective perspective; Gombrich, in a different context, tackles the question of the development of pictorial style (the language of art) from the psychological perspective of the individual artist. Both approaches are compatible, as they provide methodological tools to analyze the place of the artist and/or work of art in the sociohistorical context of their production and reception. The study of the role of the *auteur* is decentered to make way for a study of the artist and/or work as a part of a collective tradition. Gombrich, drawing on the findings of psychologists' studies of human perception, argues that individual artists do not begin the act of creation from the object as seen, but from an internalized schema held in the mind's eye. In other words, through cultural habituation, we all hold mental conceptualizations of the basic forms of objects. The artist begins with this conception and then fills in the distinguishing features that will increase the mimetic effect to the actual object before him/her. In distancing his position from that of cultural determinist, Gombrich goes on to define the "art" of the artist in his/her ability to extend and indeed challenge existing schemata (1996:264): "I believe . . . that the artist's gift is of this order. He is the man who has learnt to look critically, to probe his perceptions by trying alternative interpretations."

The representation of "scientific naturalism" had never been a priority of the traditional Japanese visual arts. Rather the Muromachi (1338-1573) and Tokugawa period (1600-1868) screen paintings, with the sky and clouds that act as a barrier or dividing line separating the human world from the heavenly are representations of the world and universe according to Confucian precepts.[5] Similarly the seasonal *kakejiku*, hanging picture scrolls

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[4] Ōbora Gengo later went on to become a director.

[5] It is interesting to note that this conception of the division between the Heavenly and Earthly continued in the titles of various versions of *Chūshingura* that bear the subtitle *Chi no maki* and *Ten no maki.* Also, in the latest Shōchiku (1994) production of

that adorned the walls of the affluent classes, depicting humans in miniature proportions to the landscape, reflect a mode of seeing the world based on an eastern view of man's significance in relation to the natural world. Within this basically Confucian conception of "reality," deep focus, which selectively privileges people and, at times, objects, is superfluous.[6] Therefore, at a simplistic level it can be argued that when the Japanese adopted film technology they also imported with it an inherent way of representing the world, a conceptual mode that was not neutral, but ideological (in its broadest sense). As David Bordwell argues, drawing on a quotation from a speech made in 1934 by A. N. Goldsmith, the President for the (American) Society of Motion Picture Engineers (Bordwell, Staiger, et al. 1999:258):

> "Showmanship," realism, invisibility: such canons guided the SMPE members toward understanding the acceptable and unacceptable choices in technical innovation, and these too became teleological. In another industry, the engineer's goal might be an unbreakable glass or lighter alloy. In the film industry, the goals were not only increased efficiency, economy, and flexibility but also spectacle, concealment of artifice, and what Goldsmith called "the production of an acceptable semblance of reality."

As my study of popular Japanese narrative cinema in the early part of the twentieth century demonstrates,[7] these qualities of "spectacle, concealment of artifice" and "an acceptable semblance of reality" came to dominate the local product.[8] However, this is not to argue that local Japanese socio-cultural practices did not have an equal or greater influence on these films.

The centrality of the *benshi* to the Japanese film experience up to the mid-1930s is a case in point, whereby the intervention of the local into the content of the foreign acts as a medium to facilitate understanding. The vocabulary used in Japanese discourse clearly distinguishes the role of the

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Chūshingura gaiden Yotsuyakaidan, the cloud effect is retained in the filming style of the ghost story segments.

[6] For a detailed analysis of style and perception in world art, see Hagen 1986.

[7] See Standish 2005:ch. 1.

[8] As with all aspects of cinema studies, one can only generalize as there are always exceptions to the rule. Kinugasa's 1926 film *A Page of Madness* (*Kurutta ippeiji*) clearly draws on German Expressionist modes of representation and not those of Hollywood.

film narrator in films derived from kabuki (*kyūgeki*) and melodramatic traditions, who provides literally the shadow dialogue (*kage zerifu*), from the *benshi*'s role as mediator, "photo-interpreter," in relation to imported films. The following article published in August 1915 in English, for the benefit of foreign readers, in one of Japan's early film trade journals, *Kinema Record,* defines the role of *benshi/katsuben* as a "photo-interpreter" (Kaeriyama 1915:5; errors in spelling and grammar reproduced in the following quotation are as in the original):

> We are sure our foreign readers may wonder at the word "Photo-interpreters." Indeed they are found only in the picture-theatres in Japan. What do you think is their business? Why as the word "Photo-interpreter "may convey its meaning to some extent, they interprete the spectators the picture-drama's synopsis before the picture appears on the screen or while the picture is shown moving on the white cloth. Sometimes they act as dialogists for the players in the picture and some of them make dialogue so skillfully as if the players in the picture were really speaking. So in some cases the moving picture plays shown to the Japanese spectators are not the *silent drama* at all the *ture play* with the help of these photo-interpreters. It is, therefore, natural that we have many eloquent photo-interpreter and often the spectators is influence by the dialogue by them. So important has become their position in the picture-theatres of Japan.
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> Such being the case, any photo-play-house in Japan has two or three "interpreters" at least, so the total number reach to above three thousand in all throughout Japan, the number of photo-play-house being more than nine hundred. Most of them are educated and have the knowledge of a foreign language—English at least. Because they must read and explain the spectators the synopsis in a foreign language shown at the beginning of every scene. As you know the picture-theatres in Japan exhibit chiefly the pictures made in foreign countries and owing to this fact the need of some interpreters sprang up to make the spectators understand what was the scene and what was taking place. Such has gradually developed and has made the present "Photo-interpreters."

Despite the exaggerations (such as the number of cinemas in Japan at the time), from the translation of the terms *benshi/katsuben* as "photo-interpreters" and the subsequent explanation of their role it is clear that the *benshi* played an instrumental role as mediators between the new and foreign films and their Japanese audiences. Western commentators on Japanese cinema have generally attributed the inclusion of *benshi* in the early silent Japanese cinema experience to "the traditions and peculiarities of Japanese culture" (Anderson 1992:261) and cited their existence as proof of Japan's difference from western cinematic traditions. Anderson, in his seminal essay on *katsuben,* saw their role as "(1) *an extension of an indigenous narrative*

practice which I call commingled media, and (2) *a modern variation of vocal storytelling traditions*" (*idem*, italics in original). However, in their analysis of the *benshi* tradition, Komatsu and Musser make the following astute observation (1987:83): "The benshi cannot be characterized in terms of an oppositional or alternative practice vis à vis Western and particularly Hollywood cinema but rather as an accommodation with these dominant Western cinemas."

As Gombrich's study indicates, the artist interprets the world in terms of known schemata, but the beholder or spectator is equally complicit in the act of creation in his/her capacity to collaborate with the artist to make sense of, or read, the image. The *benshi* were crucial as intermediaries in this process. Not only did they attempt to explain the often new and unfamiliar "schemata" that drove the creative side of the foreign narratives; in the early days at least, they also explained the principles of film technology itself. What one has, as the case of the *benshi* illustrates, is a process of modification and alteration to a new technology and related worldview, which through the passage of time and adaptation conformed to and informed local taste. Therefore, with a globalized worldview, a deterministic view of form (the technology and techniques of filmmaking) has to be tempered with an understanding of the "content," which is often derived from local storytelling traditions.

Melodramatic Narrational Norms and the *Benshi*

Genres such as those derived from the *shinpa*-traditions and the *matatabimono* films of the early-Japanese cinema can be described in western film studies' terms as melodramas. Generally speaking, the melodramatic narrational mode is structured to convey the inner states of the characters and, as such, it subordinates all else to emotional impact. All the cinematic aspects of filmmaking—*mise-en-scène*, lighting, setting, camera placement, and "point-of-view"—work to convey the inner states of the protagonists and we, the spectators, are encouraged to focus on the protagonists within the various developing situations of the *syuzhet*[9] rather

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[9] In analyzing dominant narrative and stylistic trends, it is helpful to draw on Bordwell's (1990) exposition of the Russian Formalists' theoretical divisions of narration into three concepts of *fabula*, *syuzhet*, and style. *Fabula* refers to the story, "[m]ore specifically, the *fabula* embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field . . . . *Syuzhet* (usually translated as 'plot') is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film" (*ibid.*:49-50). It is from the information given in the *syuzhet* that the spectator makes

than on a single character. This is quite different from the structure of films based on, for example, the "goal-oriented hero" of the *chanbara* film, where we are clearly encouraged to identify with the main characters, whose actions motivate the causal chain of events making up the *fabula*. The melodramatic narrational mode is omniscient, in that we, the spectators, know more about the emerging situation than any one character, and thus the narrational mode supports a situation rather than a character-centered perspective. In the pre-"talkie" films of the late 1920s and the 1930s, the *benshi* and the inclusion of inter-titles were important devices through which omniscient narration was conveyed. The *benshi* also provided a "stream of consciousness" narration that, increasingly combined with the sophisticated use of subjective cinematic techniques such as point-of-view, flashbacks, hallucinations, and imaginings, endowed protagonists with a degree of psychological depth that went far beyond inter-titles in terms of dramatic impact.

This role of the *benshi* as voice-over narration of inner states was used to great effect in the development of the *matatabimono* (the wandering *yakuza* or masterless samurai) film, which could be alternatively subtitled as "men's weepies." The *matatabimono* film is closely related to the *chanbara* genre; its main difference is that the principal protagonists, although they are men of action, are given, primarily through the *benshi*'s "stream of consciousness" narration, an inner psychological depth denied to their *chanbara* counterparts. This "stream of consciousness" narration successfully overcomes the contradiction that men of action should not show their feelings. The *benshi* provides a soliloquized articulation of the man of action's emotions. Similar techniques were later adapted to the 1960 *nagaremono* (drifter) films where voice-over narration of inner thoughts and the inclusion of verses from sentimental songs sung by the hero on the soundtrack conveyed inner states. In films of the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as *Orochi* (1925), *Hōrō zanmai* (1928), and *Banba Chūtarō mabuta no haha* (*The Mother He Never Knew*, 1931), what can be described as the *benshi*'s many cadenzas are clearly built into the structure of the films. Shots of poignant scenes of the heroes' contemplative musings are held for lengthy

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inferences, hypothesizes, and ultimately constructs the *fabula*. Style, within this context, is clearly allied to the *syuzhet*, as it refers to "the films' systematic use of cinematic signifiers" (*idem*). In other words, it is an integral component of a film's ability to express the *fabula*. This theory of narration allows us to isolate the various components of narrative and to historicize their development both in terms of theme and style. It is also useful because it acknowledges the role of the spectator in actively piecing together the components of the *syuzhet* and allying these to a given film's stylistic norms, both extrinsic (in terms of genre, star persona, and so on) and intrinsic, to create meaning.

periods, clearly allowing sufficient time for the *benshi*'s extemporization. In this way the emphasis of the causal chain of events is shifted from the hero's actions, as in the *chanbara* films, to his emotional states. In *Orochi* (1925) it is clearly the hero Heizaburō's (Bandō Tsumasaburō) sense of the injustices of a society that favors privilege above honesty and merit, while in *Hōrō zanmai* (1928), in the first instance, it is the hero's love for his wife and his desire to avenge her death. Finally, in *Banba Chūtarō* (1931) it is Chūtarō's sense of loneliness from not having a mother and a family that drives the causal chain of events that make up the *syuzhet*. To illustrate this point I shall draw on a typical scene of an attempted rape taken from *Orochi*. Scenes of attempted rape or the threat of physical harm to women were central to the Hollywood melodramatic tradition from the early 1910s and were taken up and incorporated into various Japanese popular genres[10] at the time. However, unlike their western counterparts Japanese filmmakers, due to the *benshi,* were freed from the restrictions of inter-titles for character exposition.

   Orochi, produced by the actor Bandō Tsumasaburō's own production company (Tsuma Prodakushon) and based on a screenplay by Suzukita Ryokuhei and directed by Futagawa Buntarō (1899-1966), was, as Suzukita has stated in an article in the journal *Shinario* published in 1954,[11] an attempt to elevate *jidaigeki* (*kyūgeki*) to attract audiences from the "educated" classes. The principal strategy used was to give Heizaburō a degree of psychological depth through the expression of inner conflict denied other samurai heroes, such as those portrayed by Arashi Kanjūrō,

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[10] In Hollywood, this tradition was established in films such as *The Cheat* (Cecil B. De Mille, 1915), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *Birth of a Nation* (1915, both W. D. Griffths), to name but a few. The "serial-queen" genre also featured both images of a powerful womanhood as well as extreme examples of violence to women (see Singer 2001:espec. ch. 8). In European cinema, we find similar narrative conventions in films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926).

[11] "Essentially I had different aspirations and opinions to the other young authors who aspired to write screenplays at this time. Anyhow, at this time audiences who patronized *jidaigeki* (*kyūgeki*) were from the socially lower classes. If I pressed them into viewing films of a higher artistic merit, they would probably stop coming. Therefore, in the first instance it was necessary to gradually induct audiences into the peculiar delights of *jidaigeki*. Somehow, it had to be moderately entertaining to capture the public. It was here that I adopted a similar doctrine of *hanpō shugi* developed by the founder of the *shinkokugeki* theatre movement Sawada Shōjirō. In *jidaigeki* films I incorporated elements of detection and a sense of resistance neither of which had ever been used before and I incorporated a sense of realism into the action scenes." (Suzukita, quoted in Satō 1995:23-24).

whose star persona, like that of Onoe Matsunosuke, was constructed to appeal to young boys through action. The depiction of Heizaburō's inner self was achieved using cinematic techniques and, more importantly, through interior monologues, given expression by the *benshi*.

A scene towards the middle of the film exemplifies this: Heizaburō's *yakuza* friends kidnap a girl with whom Heizaburō has fallen in love because she physically resembles his first love Namie, the daughter of the head of the Chinese Classics School from which he was expelled. The *yakuza* leave him alone in the room with her as she pleads with him not to rape her. In a sequence of ten shots Heizaburō, after roughly attempting to undo her *obi* and forcing her cringing into a corner to the left of the screen, proceeds to advance menacingly towards her. During this sequence of reverse-shots devoid of inter-titles, the *benshi*, Matsuda Shinsui, voices Otsu's pleas as direct dialogue, but in the case of Heizaburō he voices his inner conflict, his desire for Otsu, and his conscience that mitigates against this act of violence:

> **Benshi:** A fiendish voice asks Heizaburō what are you going to do? [As a social outcast] you don't have to do what society considers right.

The camera cuts between medium close-up shots of Otsu as she pleads and then back to frontal shots of Heizaburō as he slowly moves with each reverse-cut shot closer into the camera until his face, slightly to the left of the screen, fills the frame focusing on his eyes. At this point, in extreme close-up, Heizaburō moves his eyes slightly, signaling his return to consciousness and his realization that he must resist this "fiendish voice." In the next shot the camera pulls back, framing Heizaburō again in medium close-up and signaling his retreat from Otsu and the resolution of his moral dilemma. This sequence ends as it began with a shot of the *yakuza* huddled outside by the sliding door listening to what is going on in the next room.

Naturally, cinematic techniques play an important role in the depiction of inner states, and to illustrate this point I shall draw in detail on the example of *Orizuru Osen* (*The Downfall of Osen*), produced by Daiichi Eiga. A late (1935) *shinpa*-derived melodrama employing many of the conventions of the pre-"talkie" style and directed by Mizoguchi Kenji, it is based on the short story "Osen and Sōkichi" by Izumi Kyōka. The film's framing through flashback, told as a story from the main protagonists' point of view through the sophisticated use of cinematic techniques and complex parallel plot structures, makes it exemplary within the *benshi*-driven, *shinpa*-derived tradition.

Contained within the highly sophisticated structure of the *fabula* are two parallel lines of action, the relationship between Osen and Sōkichi and

an attempted crime, a fraud scheme perpetrated against a group of Buddhist monks. The film begins *in medias res* before moving to a series of flashback sequences, which establish the action of the film as past memory. Despite the implied subjectivity of the opening sequences, the parallel structure of the *syuzhet* presents an omniscient survey of the events. The parallel plotting structure of the narrative impedes the revelation of *fabula* events; as one scene ends on a question, the *mise-en-scène* shifts to the other plot line, suspending our knowledge and thus providing dramatic intrigue and drawing the spectator into the drama by apparently telling all, while retarding some information. The question follows: how does this apparently contradictory structure work?

The opening sequences at the train station are crucial, being comprised of a series of flashback sequences that apparently frame the body of the narrative within Sōkichi's point of view. Because of delays, Sōkichi stands waiting on a crowded platform while, unbeknownst to him, Osen sits in the waiting room. He is held in medium close-up as he stands gazing out to the right of the frame; this is followed by a cut to a point-of-view shot of a Shintō shrine on a hill, the object of Sōkichi's gaze. This sequence of shots is repeated, allowing sufficient time for the *benshi's* "stream of consciousness" cadenza. This is followed by a shot of leaves being blown in the wind, an intrinsic norm established in these opening sequences that triggers flashback sequences. This same shot will be used in the final scenes of the film; however, in this instance it is from Osen's point of view. During the opening sequences, Osen is highlighted by the key light, sitting in a dazed state and likewise gazing out of the frame to the right. The point-of-view cut between Osen, held in medium close-up, and the Shintō shrine visually links Osen and Sōkichi, as does the camera via a right track along the platform where Sōkichi is standing to the waiting room and a medium close-up of Osen. They are linked through framing, lighting, and camera movement, and despite their different physical positions on the platform (he is standing and she sitting some distance away in the waiting room), the point-of-view shot of the shrine is taken from the same angle. Both are thus visually conjoined as the main characters of the film. As the film moves into the main narrative with a flashback from Sōkichi's point of view, the camera follows his gaze from the *genkan* of the antique shop and, entering the house, peers behind the screen. The camera tracks forward along the corridor before a sharp swish pan left as it focuses on Osen. After this the narrational mode shifts to omniscience and the introduction of the crime plot.

Thus two narrational strategies are used: one, the subjective, supporting the Osen/Sōkichi plot through the *benshi*'s "stream of

consciousness" narration, point-of-view, and flashback sequences that are centered on Sōkichi's psychological motivation in his relationship with Osen; and two, the omniscient narrational style characteristic of the crime plot. Despite the inclusion of flashback sequences from Osen's point of view in the opening scenes, in neither of the plot lines is her character given much in the way of psychological depth—that is, until the final sequences, when she is in the hospital, where super-impositions reveal her deranged mental state. In the early scenes, via the dual plot structure, various questions are raised about her moral status, and it is the investigation into her and her relationship with Sōkichi that motivates the causal chain of events that maintains, in large part, spectator interest.

From the first scene, Sōkichi's character as an important man is established, first by his attire and demeanor; this is then confirmed when a group of university students greet him. On the other hand, Osen's character as a woman of dubious moral character is also established when a group of drunken revelers make lurid aspersions that are voiced through the *benshi*. The visual linking of the two main characters through cinematic devices, point of view, framing, lighting, and camera movement sets up a contradiction in relation to the norms of social expectations. What type of woman is Osen and how can she and Sōkichi be connected? For most of the film Osen is held at a distance and her actions are observed either from Sōkichi's point of view or through the omniscient narration. The narrative during the rest of the film sets out to disprove the initial inferences drawn from these opening scenes and structures her character as a "good" woman, despite her apparent circumstances. This is done through both the crime plot—she is opposed to the villains' plan to cheat the monks, and it is she who eventually foils their plans and has them arrested—and through Sōkichi's recollections. She is a fallen woman, but thanks to Sōkichi's memories of her and the depiction of her role in foiling the crime, providing objective "empirical" support for Sōkichi's subjective memories, we are encouraged toward a realization that circumstances, and not some intrinsic evil, have drawn her into this state.

The *benshi*'s "stream of consciousness" narration is central both to the subjective portrayal of Sōkichi's memories of his relationship with Osen and to the provision of background information about his circumstances before he came to Tokyo. The *benshi* also helps to guide the spectator through the complex temporal disunity of the ordering of *syuzhet* events. Visually, windswept leaves denote an intrinsic norm that cues subjective states. However, these cues are established much more quickly in the spectators' minds with the aid of the *benshi.* Broadly speaking, due to the inclusion of the *benshi* within the structure of silent films, we can make a distinction

between a "behavioralist" style of filmmaking exemplified in the Hollywood continuity system, which, under the guidance of Kido Shirō, was taken up by the Shōchiku Studios from the mid-1920s, and a melodramatic style based on the psychological exposition of character's inner states through the *benshi* cadenza. European cinemas, in attempts to re-establish their film industries after World War I, and to distinguish their products from the Hollywood style, attempted to express similar psychological states through the adaptation of expressionistic and impressionistic styles. While the Soviets experimented with theories of "montage" within "intellectual" film circles, increasingly influenced by foreign films, the role of the *benshi* came to be seen as an impediment to the artistic expression through the purely visual.

Calls for Reform and the *Jun'eiga Undō*

Up until the mid-1920s Japanese cinema audiences were divided into the "educated," who patronized foreign films and spurned local productions, and women and children, who respectively patronized films derived from the *shinpa*-melodrama tradition and the *kyūgeki/chanbara* tradition. These latter groups were referred to disparagingly as "nursing mothers" (*komori onna*) and "runny-nosed brats" (*hanatare kozō*).[12] This division in audiences was reflected in a tension between filmmakers who were influenced by western cinematic techniques and those who were content to stay within the bounds of the existing studio system. The innovation and implementation of new techniques required investment and was at first resisted by Nikkatsu. Equally the *benshi*, who had installed themselves as the principal attraction of the cinema, resisted change. They found it difficult to adapt their narration to films with fast editing. D. W. Griffith's 1916 multi-plot film, *Intolerance*, was screened in Japan, giving *benshi* a clear indication of the difficulties to be resisted. The inclusion of dialogue inter-titles was similarly seen as a threat to their autonomy and role as an instrumental component of the overall film experience. In the debates in Japan at this time the *benshi* were seen as one of the elements that were impeding Japanese filmmaking practices. Writing in the trade journal *Kinema Record* in 1916, Kaeriyama

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[12] Onoe Matsunosuke, who moved to Nikkatsu and had by 1923 become a major star, was the idol of the "runny-nosed brats." He was affectionately known as *medama no Matchan* because it was thought at the time that he had unusually large eyes, and in the best kabuki tradition glaring at one's opponent was an instrumental part of a climactic fight scene.

Norimasa summed up the mood of progressive filmmakers and "educated" audiences under the title "Why are Japanese Productions So Uninteresting?" (16; my translation):

> As moving pictures are pantomime (*pantomaimu*), the audience must be made to feel the emotions through an actor's facial expressions. However, under the current system, as they have the support of the *benshi* dialogue the audience can follow the plot, but, if we were to watch these films in the ideal situation without *benshi* narration, I doubt we would understand what was being expressed.

By the late 1910s, as the above quotation indicates, there was a call among serious filmmakers, and among "educated" audiences increasingly exposed to imported films, to explore the expressive possibilities of cinema. Kaeriyama Norimasa was one of the first to call for a reform of the domestic film industry as part of a bid to produce Japanese films for export. It is hard to make a definitive pronouncement on the merits or demerits of the *benshi* system when so little of their work is available, and the tapes that do survive (such as the Matsuda Company video series) are of exemplary quality. This, perhaps, is one of the principal reasons that mitigated against their survival in an industry that was increasingly being structured along Taylorist lines of production. The human element of the *benshi* resisted product standardization. Certainly when we compare in purely cinematic terms the scenes such as the attempted rape scene described above in *Orochi* with a similar scene in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* when Rotwang attempts to murder Maria (Brigitte Helm) or the murder of the heroine (Lillian Gish) by her father in *Broken Blossoms*, the *Orochi* scene seems crude by comparison. In terms of camera movement, Heizaburō physically moves in towards the stationary camera to bring his face into an extreme close-up and as he appears to pull away, it is in fact the camera that pulls back altering his position within the frame. In world-cinematic terms, these crude camera movements are indicative of films from the early to late 1910s and not from the mid- to late 1920s. This technique of filming extreme close-ups was also used in the 1927 film based on the novel by Mikami Otokichi, *Hyakuman-ryō hibun* (*The Million Yen Secret*), and again in a 1928 episode of the *Kurama Tengu*. However, when we consider the psychological depth that the *benshi*, Matsuda Shinsui, brings to this scene through his articulation of Heizaburō's thoughts, we see that a complex shift in spectator identification is possible, in that our sympathies are directed to Heizaburō rather than his victim—unlike the two western examples stated. Likewise, in *Osen* the sophisticated temporal disunity through which Sōkichi's memories are

structured, it can be argued, is only possible through the inclusion of the *benshi*.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the *benshi*'s initial role was to facilitate the audiences' understanding of the causal, spatial, and temporal relations of cinema, a new and novel storytelling technology; and that the *benshi* were able to hold their position much longer than the film "lecturers" employed in American cinemas precisely because, as Komatsu and Musser astutely point out (1987:88): "The benshi's position required them to mediate between Japanese audiences that were comparatively unfamiliar with Western representational methods and some Japanese producers who wanted to embrace the most extreme practices of Western cinema." Furthermore, economic factors contributed to the central position held by *benshi* in the Japanese cinema experience. Due to the relatively small number of prints sold, it was uneconomical for American and European producers to translate inter-titles into Japanese. Equally, Japanese cinemas tended to be large, unlike the American nickelodeons, and this bigger audience helped offset the cost to Japanese distributors of employing *benshi*. Having established themselves as an essential part of the filmgoing experience, they proceeded as performers to consolidate their position, often vying with the film itself for top billing status. Their importance to the domestically produced cinema can be seen in the actual structuring of certain genres to incorporate the *benshi* cadenza within the film itself. However, the arbitrariness of performance ultimately mitigated against their continued role, as sound technology brought with it the product standardization that ensured quality and increased studio control over the products they produced.

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