

Teaching Modern Japanese History with Animation Satoshi Kon's *MILLENNIUM ACTRESS*

DIRECTED BY SATOSHI KON

DVD, 87 MINUTES, COLOR, 2003

DISTRIBUTED BY DREAMWORKS HOME ENTERTAINMENT

REVIEWED BY MELEK ORTABASI



©200 Co Fish Pictures

Chiyoko's life, from her birth in 1923 to her precipitous exit from the film business in the late 1960s, moves in tandem with Japan's building of empire, increasing militarism and entry into war, defeat, and then ultimately, post-war recovery.

In this essay, I will give suggestions on how anime can be used profitably in the classroom, with specific reference to Satoshi Kon's *Millennium Actress* (*Sennen joyū*, 2001).¹ This animated feature, which distinguished itself by sharing the Grand Prize at the 5th Japan Media Arts Festival held by Japan's Agency of Cultural Affairs, is so replete with cultural and historical references that it lends itself well to any discussion of modern Japanese culture and history.²

Before the first viewing, offer a brief synopsis of *Millennium Actress* so your students can situate themselves, though one that is as neutral as possible: "This fictional, animated film from Japan is about a documentarian who makes a biographical film on a famous actress who has now retired from the business." Consider assigning a viewing response, which could ask the following questions: Why does Genya (the documentarian) want to film the actress' story?

How does Chiyoko (the actress) tell her story? When do you think Chiyoko was born? When did her career end? What, besides being the biography of an actress, do you think this film is about? These may seem basic questions, but since students will tend to focus on the narrative first, it is a good place to start. Once they have answered these questions, the real "detective work" can begin.

THERE ARE TWO PARALLEL HISTORIES IN THE FILM: one, Chiyoko's personal recollections of the Japanese film industry from the 1930s to the 1960s; the other, Japanese history writ large. That the two are depicted inseparably is something students will soon discover. However, when one watches the film only for plotline, there is little to discuss, since the recurring theme of the film is Chiyoko's desperate search for a lover whom she met only once in her youth. Ultimately, the film's protagonist is not to be found in a single character: this is a "movie about movies" that demonstrates the dramatic role (no pun intended) this medium has taken in shaping the way we imagine and remember history.

Of course, this is not where a class discussion would start, but perhaps where it could end. In the meantime, there are mysteries to be solved, since the film is anything but transparent to someone not yet familiar with seminal moments in modern Japanese history. Chiyoko's life, from her birth in 1923 to her precipitous exit from the film business in the late 1960s, moves in tandem with Japan's building of empire, increasing militarism and entry into war, defeat, and then ultimately, postwar recovery. These major events or "stages" of history are all referred to in the film, offering instructors a variety of historical topics from which to choose.

First, as a general historical text to accompany the film, I recommend W. G. Beasley's *The Rise of Modern Japan: Political, Economic and Social Change Since 1850* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). [This book is a fairly conventional history that is frequently adopted as a textbook.] However, since it is so dense, it probably should not be the only reading you use. In conjunction with this good basic reference, I suggest the more recent and very accessible *Modern Japan: A History in Documents* by James L. Huffman (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Like Beasley, the chapters are organized chronologically, but the main part of each is a sequence of excerpts from contemporary documents, be they novels, poems, newspaper articles, or political manifestos. This is an excellent text for letting students address the issues of the day interactively.

HERE I LIST SOME OF THE HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT MOMENTS IN THE FILM

I have added approximate times in parentheses to indicate when the relevant scenes occur.³ The notes appended to each item give further English-language readings and viewings through which to pursue each topic/event.

Fig. 1, 09:16

Chiyoko is born during the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, which destroyed much of Tokyo. Here we see what looks like a commemorative photograph of Chiyoko's mother holding her newborn daughter in front of the destroyed family business.⁴

Fig. 2, 09:40

Though WWII and the buildup to it are not explicitly treated in a documentary fashion, we see images of marches in support of Japan's military victories in Asia, as well as soldiers leaving for the front. The banners in the background bear the names of the various young men who have enlisted.⁵

Fig. 3, 24:17

Chiyoko's film debut as a teenager is in a movie set in Manchuria, clearly intended to bolster public morale about Japanese colonialism in greater Asia (she stars as an army nurse). This offers the opportunity to discuss how cinema can be transformed into an organ of propaganda, as it has been in many countries, including in the US.⁶



1

©2000 Co Fish Pictures



2

©2000 Co Fish Pictures



3

©2000 Co Fish Pictures



4

©200 Co Fish Pictures



5

©200 Co Fish Pictures



6

©200 Co Fish Pictures

... most of the film's 'message' is to be found in the visual rather than the acoustic channel—which makes it rather unusual among narrative films.

Fig. 4, 49:30

Again, while the defeat is again not discussed in detail (the details of which, of course, are intimately known by the Japanese target audience of this film), we see Chiyoko experience the fire-bombing raids on Tokyo.⁷

Fig. 5, 53:56

Chiyoko describes the privations of post-war life, signaled by her plain clothing and scenes of the black market. American GIs, indicating the presence of Occupation forces, tower over the tired-looking and malnourished Japanese around them.⁸

Fig. 6, 1:02:48

Finally, as we enter the period of economic recovery of the 50s and 60s, we see Chiyoko as housewife cleaning her modern living room, complete with vacuum cleaner, and TV upon which is being shown footage of the 1962 launch of Friendship 7, the first manned US spacecraft to orbit the Earth.⁹

Fig. 7, 54:22

An appropriate endpoint to this historical arc is perhaps Chiyoko's role in a "monster movies." We see a press conference promoting a *Godzilla*-like film. Scholars have commented that this sci-fi-related genre and its apocalyptic, yet hopeful and forward-looking nature is emblematic of Japan's conflicted attitude toward its global economic and technological success.¹⁰

It is perhaps obvious by now that most of the film's 'message' is to be found in the visual rather than the acoustic channel—which makes it rather unusual among narrative films. In other words, to get the most



©2000 Go Fish Pictures

7

out of the film, students will need to learn how to focus less on the “story” communicated mostly through the dialogue, and more on what the images tell them.

A FIRST STEP TOWARD CONTEXTUALIZING THE FILM HISTORICALLY can be done with the help of a concise timeline of modern Japanese history, such as that provided on pages 212–213 of Huffman’s book. In conjunction with the more specific visual and textual sources I refer to in the notes, you will have more than enough material to discuss these historical moments from several perspectives. Of course, this sequencing paints a certain narrative picture of modern Japanese history. Any of these events deserve in-depth discussion, and certainly their relationships to each other demand scrutiny as well.¹¹ Of course, it goes without saying that Japan’s history does not end in 1970.

While it includes realistic detail, and at times even facsimiles of historical documents (such as photographs and movie posters), *Millennium Actress* is a very contemporary (re)imagination of Japan’s past. What I propose is a multimodal pedagogical approach that will engage you and your students in the complex task of relating a visual medium to the historical reality it tries to depict. *Millennium Actress*, in its best moments, is about precisely that relationship. The most important lesson your students may learn from this film is that cinematic realism, while convincing, is *not* the same thing as reality—even though often the only way to confront history is through such media.

So what *does* the film say about Japanese history itself? I leave that for you and your students to decide. ■

NOTES

1. All Japanese names are listed with family name first, as is the custom in Japan.
2. It shared the award with Miyazaki Hayao’s *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*, 2001).
3. The 2003 Dreamworks Home Entertainment DVD release is readily available for purchase (subtitled, 1 hour, 27 minutes). Note that time counts will differ somewhat according to media player.
4. For some captioned photos of the destruction wrought by the earthquake, see http://www.eas.slu.edu/Earthquake_Center/1923EQ/, prepared by the Earthquake Center at St. Louis University.
5. For additional resources, see the essays collected in *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945*. Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
6. See Peter B. High’s *The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years’ War, 1931–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). To show students both sides of the issue, I recommend US propaganda films, such as the 1945 “documentary” *Know Your Enemy: Japan* (dir. Frank Capra) available as a bonus track on the 2001 DVD release *Pearl Harbor: December 7, 1941 Commemorative Edition* (a 2-disc set).
7. The defeat is treated in detail in both of the historical texts I recommend, so I do not offer additional sources here.
8. For more information on the US Occupation, I recommend John W. Dower’s Pulitzer-prize-winning *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
9. For a good picture of the daily life of middle-class Japanese during this period, see Simon Partner, “Manufacturing Desire: The ‘Electrical Lifestyle’ and the Nurturing of the Japanese Consumer,” *Social Science Japan: Japan in the 1950s*, No. 12

While it includes realistic detail, and at times even facsimiles of historical documents (such as photographs and movie posters), *Millennium Actress* is a very contemporary (re)imagination of Japan’s past.

(March 1998), <http://newslet.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/ssj12/index.html>. I also suggest showing a clip from Ozu Yasujiro’s *Ohayō* (*Good Morning*, 1959, available on Criterion Collection DVD). Not only does the film address the consumerism that came to characterize this decade (two boys petition their parents for a TV), but the 1950s/1960s “section” of *Millennium Actress* itself takes many of its visual cues from Ozu’s famously consistent style.

10. A clip from *Gojira* (*Godzilla*, 1954) (available in multiple DVD versions) is certainly worth showing, as is having a discussion about its metaphorical meaning, since the monster is supposedly the result of US nuclear arms testing. Susan Napier discusses Japan’s love-hate relationship with technology and its expression in anime in her book, *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
11. *Millennium Actress* also contains many references to premodern history, primarily in terms of period films in which Chiyoiko has starred. Because these references are even more complex both semantically and culturally, I have chosen to focus only on the events that occur during Chiyoiko’s own lifetime.

MELEK ORTABASI is an Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Hamilton College in upstate New York. She has published several articles related to Japanese animation. She also is coeditor of the anthology *The Modern Murasaki: Writing by Women of Meiji Japan* (with Rebecca Copeland). Her research interests, besides Japanese animation and pop culture, include folklore studies, Japanese women writers, and translation theory. She is currently working on a book about ethnologist Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962).