Teaching Traditional Japanese Arts and Literature through Film

By Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.

"The touchstone of Japanese cinema," writes Joan Mellen in her seminal work on Japanese cinema, *The Waves at Genji's Door*, "is its constant preoccupation with history."[1] Certainly Japanese history is well represented and considered in its cinema.

There exist *jidaigeki* (Japanese period films) aplenty that ably present various historical periods and events. Tokugawa Japan, Heian Japan, Meiji Japan, etc. can all be studied by viewing films set during those eras. Yet because of the history of Japanese cinema, teachers of Asian culture can also use Japanese films in the classroom in order to study the traditional performing and visual arts of Japan.

Donald Richie, perhaps the foremost authority on Japanese film writing in English, observes that the origin of the cinema in Japan was "based on the incorporation of Western invention into Japanese tradition."[2] Aaron Gerow offers a more complex analysis of the origins of Japanese cinema, considering the history of the importation of cinematic technology into Japan at the end of the nineteenth century as "the attempt to articulate a foreign object into the domestic language, of naming what had not yet been named."[3] In short, from the very beginning of cinema in Japan, the technology has been used in a unique indigenous fashion, itself having a fascinating and complex history.

In 1896 Edison's Kinetoscope was imported into Japan. The following year Edison's Vitascope and the Lumière Cinématographe were also imported to show films in Osaka and Tokyo.[4] The showing of films in Japan was rooted in the traditional performing arts: films would usually be shown in a theater, a *benshi* (a commentator who would perform dialogue, explain the images, and comment on the film) would perform along with the film, often accompanied by a *samisen* (a stringed instrument used in the traditional theaters), much like the *jōruri* singer of *bunraku* (the puppet theater of Japan), and the projector itself would occasionally be set up on one side of the stage, opposite the screen, so that it was as much a part of the "performance" of cinema as the projected image. Richie reports that as a result of these conventions, film was regarded as "an extension of the stage, a new kind of drama" as opposed to the Western view of film as "a new kind of photography."[5]

As a result, while filmmakers in the West were pointing their cameras at trains, horses, boxers, ocean waves, and other subjects from life, the Japanese filmed their theater. The first films to be made in Japan include *Gion Geisha* (1898), depicting a dancing geisha, and *Maple Viewing* (1898), a recording of the Kabuki play of the same

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name.[6] The legacy of these theatrical beginnings has profoundly influenced film in Japan in numerous ways and also allows for the Western student to view Japanese films in order to experience and understand Japanese traditional arts.

There are three ways in which film incorporates the traditional arts. First, film can use traditional theater, literature, or other narratives as source material.[7] For example, *The Tale of Genji* has been adapted many times, including as an animated version in 1985. There exist no less than 85 versions of the classic play *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, written in 1748 for the Kabuki and Bunraku theaters.[8] These two theater traditions in particular have served as a rich vein that the cinema industry has mined for source material.

Numerous films that use Japanese theater as source material are available to be shown in the American classroom, and the scripts of the original plays are also available in English translations. One can give students the original text(s) and explore the original work as an example of traditional Japanese theater, and then have the students watch the adaptation and look for similarities and differences. I have had success in having students read *Ataka*, a Nōh play, *Kanjinchō*, a Kabuki play based on it, and then watch *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (*Tora no O o Fumu Otokotachi*, 1945), a Kurosawa Akira film based on both plays. Unlike the stylized presentation of the original dramas, however, Kurosawa offers a psychologically realistic version of the story.[9] Students encountering the two texts and the film gain an understanding of the relationship between Nōh and Kabuki, as well as an appreciation for the development of the story between the different versions.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the famous Japanese playwright who wrote some of the greatest dramas of Japan, has in particular served as a useful source for film. Among the many adaptations of his classic plays into film are: *Chikamatsu Monogatari* (dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, 1954) which has been presented in English as *Crucified Lovers* and is adapted from *The Almanac-Maker's Tale*; *Yoru no Tsuzumi* (dir. Imai Tadashi, 1958) called *Night Drum*, is based on *The Drums of the Waves at Horikawa*; and *Shinjū Ten no Amijima* (dir. Shinoda Masahiro, 1969), based on the play of the same name, is called *Double Suicide*. Chikamatsu's other great love suicide play, *Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, has been adapted as well (*Sonezaki Shinjū*, dir. Masumura Yasuzo, 1978). Lastly, (*Yari no Gonza,* dir. Shinoda Masahiro, 1985), *Gonza the Spearman* has been adapted from the play of the same name. There is simply no shortage of Chikamatsu's plays for students to read, and there is no shortage of adaptations of those plays to then watch on the screen.

Many early modern Japanese novels have also been adapted into film. Mori Ogai's *Gan* (*Wild Geese*) is readily available in translation to be read as a novel and then viewed as a filmed adaptation. Likewise, *Sanshō the Bailiff*, adapted from a short story by the same author, is available for the classroom. Many Japanese novels and short stories have been adapted to the screen, allowing students to read the works of Kōbō Abe or Natsume Sōseki, to name but two of dozens, and then watch their adaptations. Mishima Yukio, in particular, has had several novels adapted into film—the 1975 adaptation of *Kinkakuji* (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*), for example, or even a 1976 American adaptation of *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea*, starring Sarah Miles and Kris Kristofferson. This last film, in particular, is useful for examining cross-cultural adaptation between East and West and literature and film.[10]

In the classroom, film can be used in conjunction with literature, providing an introduction to both Japanese film and Japanese literature, as well as a useful intellectual exercise of comparing two modes of representation. Thus, films which use the theater and literature of traditional culture as source material can become part of a larger exploration of that theater and literature, the historic periods represented, and even the relationship between an adaptation and its source material.

The second way in which traditional arts are used in cinema is the incorporation of elements of the arts. For example, Kurosawa uses Nōh and Kabuki music in a number of his plays. Kurosawa's *jidai-geki*, in particular *Ran* (1985) and *Kumonosu-jo* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957), use many elements of the traditional theater, from music to masks, to styles of staging. The stories themselves in these

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two films come from Shakespeare, so the films are not like *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* in that they are not adaptations of traditional narratives.[11] But Kurosawa uses aspects of the traditional theaters in both of these films. In the classroom the study of this "borrowing" can lead to understanding of both the traditional art being used and the reasons why a director such as Kurosawa might use such elements in a realistic film.

Similarly, *Narayama-bushi kō* (*The Ballad of Narayama*, dir. Kinoshita Keisuke, 1958) is adapted from a modern novel, yet it utilizes a *gidayū*-style narrator, dramatizes the traditional conflict of *ninjō* (personal desire) with *giri* (duty), *samisen* music, and Kabuki-style staging. Much like Kurosawa's films, Kinoshita's is realistic in presentation, yet the elements of traditional theater are present and are used to comment on the action and facilitate the narrative.

Japanese painting has also influenced and been incorporated into film. Films such as *Jigokumon* (*Gate of Hell*, dir. Kinugasa Teinosuke, 1952) and the aforementioned *Chikamatsu Monogatari* are but two primary examples of the impact which traditional painting has had on film. The two also represent the two different ways in which elements of *ukiyo-e* and other Japanese painting styles are used by directors. Anderson and Richie argue of *Chikamastu Monzaemon* that, "The film represented Mizoguchi's style at its most painterly. The influence of the graphic arts, always strong in Mizoguchi's work, was readily apparent but was quite different from that seen in, say, *Gate of Hell*. In the Kinugasa film, the influence consists of literal copying of the attitudes and tableaux seen in Japanese paintings; in the Mizoguchi film, the graphic arts have been fully 'cinematized.'"[12] Regardless of style and technique, however, both films are "cinematic paintings" that can be considered in the context of Japanese visual arts. Either film, or both, provides interesting images for comparison with traditional Japanese painting.[13]

The third way in which cinema incorporates the traditional arts is to represent the historical form and practice of the arts within the film itself. For example, *Yukinojo Henge* (*An Actor's Revenge*, dir. Ichikawa Kon, 1963) tells the story of an *onna-gata*, an actor in the Kabuki theater who plays only female roles, who seeks revenge against the men who he believes drove his parents to suicide. The film features several scenes set within a Kabuki theater, showing performances, audience behavior, sets, costumes, etc. Yukinojo, the actor of the title, uses all the elements of theater to avenge himself on his enemies, resulting in a narrative that students will enjoy and appreciate, yet will also demonstrate the practice of Kabuki.[14]

Similarly, the art of *ukiyo-e* painting is at the heart of *Utamaro o Meguru Gonin no Onna* (*Utamaro and His Five Women*, dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, 1945). The merchant culture of the Tokugawa era, filled with Kabuki, *ukiyo-e*, and the pleasure quarters of the Floating World are the background for Mizoguchi's film about one of the greatest painters in Tokugawa Japan. The film is a product of the culture of postwar, anti-feudal, occupied Japan, yet from the opening procession of geisha through Kyōto during the cherry blossom festival, through scenes of Utamaro painting, to the death of Ōkita, on whose back Utamaro has tattooed a work of art, Mizoguchi is interested just as much in art, the life of the artist, and the place of art in society as he is in creating an anti-feudal film. The student who watches this film comes away with more of an understanding of the culture and practice of painting.

In conclusion, not every film is right for every classroom or every course, but the sheer wealth of material available allows for a great deal of opportunities and options for instructors who want to use films to present not just works of cinema or dramatizations of a particular period of history, but all aspects of culture. Teachers of Japanese literature, visual arts, performing arts, culture, and history will discover that many Japanese films are not just illuminative of a particular historical period but also serve as a touchstone to demonstrate the history, theory, practice, and cultural context of the traditional arts in Japan. Individual films can be studied in conjunction with translations of source material, documentaries and articles about the practice of traditional arts and other recordings in order to better understand the culture, the cinema, the history, and the arts of Japan.[15] ■

NOTES

1. Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan Through Its Cinema* (New York: Pantheon, 1976). p. xxvi.
2. Donald Richie, *Japanese Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). p. 6.
3. Aaron Gerow, "The Word Before the Image: Criticism, the Screenplay, and the Regulation of Meaning in Prewar Japanese Film Culture," *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*, eds. Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 3–35. The larger topic of

Gerow's essay concerns the complex and paradoxical relationship between image and text in Japanese cinema from its very origins. The author highly recommends both the essay and the volume in which it can be found for useful ideas in the teaching of Japanese cinema and culture.

4. I am in debt to the chronology of Japanese cinema at the end of Sato Tadao's *Currents in Japanese Cinema,* trans. Gregory Barrett (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1982, pp. 249–62) for these dates. The reader is also directed to Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie's *Japanese Film: Art and Industry,* rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) for further details of the history of cinema in Japan.
5. Richie, 2, although recent scholarship is beginning to see a far more complex relationship between text and image, film and stage, and indigenous and foreign elements and technologies. The reader is directed to Aaron Gerow's essay (see note 3, above), the writings of Noel Burch, Arthur Noletti, and David Desser (see note 13, below).
6. Anderson and Richie, p. 105.
7. The reader is directed to two excellent books by Keikō Iwai McDonald that study the connections between cinema and the traditional theater and modern literature of Japan, *Japanese Classical Theater in Films* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), which gives considerable background on several of the films discussed in this article, as well as an outstanding historical survey of the influence of Kabuki, Nōh, and Bunraku on film, and *From Book to Screen: Modern Japanese Literature in Film* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), which considers adaptations of novels into films. Both books are very useful in the classroom.
8. The best known in the United States are the 1941 version, *Genroku Chūshingura*, directed by Mizoguchi Kenji and the 1962 version, *Chushingura*, directed by Inagaki Hiroshi. Both are readily available on video and DVD.
9. I have found two English language versions of *Kanjinchō*, one translated by A. C. Scott, *Kanjinchō: A Japanese Kabuki Play* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1953), and the other by James Brandon and Tamoko Niwa, found in *Kabuki Plays* (New York, Samuel French, 1966). *Ataka* can be found in translation in Kenneth Yasuda's *Masterworks of the Nōh Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
10. The film is an interesting and unique adaptation of the Mishima novel that resets the story of a homicidal teenage boy reacting to his mother's affair with a sailor in contemporary America. The film is available on VHS, but carries an R rating and because of adult situations and strong sexual content may not be appropriate for high school audiences.
11. The stories come from *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, respectively, and thus are frequently employed in the English Literature classroom as examples of cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. For further readings along those lines the reader is encouraged to examine Anthony Davies's *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). There has also been a great deal of research lately on Shakespeare on the Japanese stage, and the films of Kurosawa can form the beginning of a larger classroom exploration of Japanese Shakespeare. Additional English language sources on the topic (many including essays and/or chapters on Kurosawa's Shakespearean films) include:
    Anzai Tetsuo, Soji Iwasaki, Holger Klein, and Peter Milward, eds. *Shakespeare in Japan* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1999).
    Fujita, Minoru and Leonard Pronko. *Shakespeare: East and West*. (New York: St. Martins, 1996).
    Kawachi Yoshiko, ed. *Japanese Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998).
    Ryuta, Minami, Ian Carruthers, and John Gillies. *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
    Sasayama, Takashi, J. R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, eds. *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
    Toyoda, M. *Shakespeare in Japan: An Historical Survey*. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1940).
    Ueno, Yoshiko. *Hamlet and Japan*. (New York: AMS Press, 1995).
12. Anderson and Richie, p. 274.
13. Kurosawa, in fact, painted much of *Ran* as story boards before filming it, and the paintings are available in a single volume with the screenplay. The author has found this volume useful for considering the differences between image, text, filmed image, spoken text, etc. in the classroom. See Akira Kurosawa's *Ran,* trans. Tadashi Shishido (Boston: Shambala, 1986).
14. The reader is directed to Ian Breakwell's BFI Film Classics volume *An Actor's Revenge* (London: British Film Institute, 1995) for its in-depth analysis of the film.
15. Additional sources that the teacher of Japanese cinema may find useful:
    Bock, Audie. *Japanese Film Directors*. (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1985).
    Burch, Noel. *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*. Berkeley: (University of California Press, 1979).
    Davis, Darrell William. *Picturing Japaneseness*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
    Desser, David. *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
    Goodwin, James. *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
    Nolletti, Jr., Arthur, and David Desser, eds. *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
    Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
    Washburn, Dennis and Carole Cavanaugh, eds. *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
    Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

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