



Using Film to Explore History

Thomas Keirstead

December 2002

“The time will come,” filmmaker D. W. Griffith declared in 1915, when “children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again.” Griffith envisioned the library of the future as populated by “long rows of boxes ... at each box a push button and before each box a seat. Suppose you wish to ‘read up’ on a certain episode in Napoleon’s life. Instead of consulting all the authorities, wading laboriously through a host of books ... you will merely ... press a button and see actually what happened.”

Historians vs. Filmmakers. Since Griffith’s era, cinema and historiography have been rivals. Like many rivalries, this one obscures some striking similarities between the two. From the beginnings of the cinema, filmmakers have shown a fascination for historical events. And despite constantly carping about the inaccuracy of most historical films, many historians are secretly fans of the genre. Griffith’s mythical library—uncannily like today’s computer-filled classroom—promised to realize what *both* film and history have long declared as their goal: to present the past as it really was.

Film, it must be admitted, probably has the upper hand in achieving this goal. Film’s ability to serve up living images of past events gives it an advantage over most history books. Most feature films invite their viewers to identify with the characters and scenes depicted on screen; watching Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) leaves one with a visceral and nearly indelible sense of what a Japanese village must have looked like, and a feeling as well for some of the ideas about status that came to structure early modern Japan. The gruesome opening scenes of Shōhei Imamura’s *Black Rain* (1989), likewise, drive home the horrors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in a way that few written accounts can. Even a fantasy like *Shall We Dance* (Masayuki Sudo, 1997) can offer a glimpse into everyday Japanese life, its quirks and frustrations, that is both captivating and informative.

These examples suggest one very common way of putting film to use in a classroom. Films serve here as a stand-in for reality; their function is to recreate another place or time, ideally in a way that will both inform and entertain. Japanese history is in fact well served in this respect. The *jidaigeki*, or period film, is a well-respected and well-established genre. Just about every period of Japanese history can be “viewed” by means of film.

Using film in the classroom does, however, raise some questions. How true is the depiction? How can one separate out what is accurate from the parts that provide a misleading picture of life during a particular era? How, moreover, is

one to judge, given that there is very little available in English that might help one make these sorts of distinctions? Hayao Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke* (1997), for example, contains some wonderfully accurate images of medieval life (the market town, the lepers in Eboshi’s “Irontown,” the film’s depictions of women are all taken from medieval picture scrolls). Yet these touches are likely to be lost amidst the much more vivid depictions of gods and monsters.

Unfortunately, certain elements of history lend themselves more readily to film than others. Battles, assassinations, the events of political history—their inherent drama means that they are more easily recreated than the material that makes the basis of social or cultural history. It is inherently more difficult to put daily life, mores, gender, or ideas on film because they are much less likely to be eventful and dramatic.

Historians’ ideas, moreover, about what is required in a faithful reproduction of the past are frequently at variance with those of filmmakers. Historians’ preoccupation with context, cause, and explanation means that they scrutinize films for their ability to address “broader questions,” to explain social movements or a society’s foibles.

Filmmakers tend to see the injunction to present the past accurately in terms of costume and set design and often go to extraordinary lengths to get these details correct. Kenji Mizoguchi, for example, insisted that his set and costume designers use authentic materials—true antiques, actual armor. (His designers used to lie to him: “Of course that chest—or kimono or teapot—is real,” they would assure him. Mizoguchi, it turns out, could not really tell the difference between genuine and fake articles.) Most historians, by contrast, do not care about details like clothing, and are unimpressed by filmmakers’ claims that they are accurately depicting the past. Historians tend, it seems, to be much more interested in how well a film conveys the feel of the past: a vague notion, certainly, but one that usually has to do with how well a film depicts the ways people in the past thought and felt, how well it captures why they might have acted as they did. Because historians and filmmakers have different ideas about what constitutes faithful depiction, they tend to fall into endless, and largely fruitless debates. As a result, we do not get any closer to thinking constructively about how film might actually be used to reflect on history.

The Filmmaker as Historian: *Black Rain*. When teaching Japanese history and film, one should try to reconcile the two sides and think of the filmmaker as a historian, who happens to be working in a visual medium rather than with words. A great film for these purposes is Imamura’s *Black*

Rain, a profoundly moving meditation on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and its place in history and in the lives of ordinary people. The film's opening scenes recreate the horrors of the bombing, and so might well be used in a conventional way to ask about what happened. But Imamura also calls our attention to the tropes that have since come to signify the bombing: the clock permanently stopped at the moment of impact, the mushroom cloud and the black rain that fell afterwards, the horrific trek through a city reduced to rubble. The bulk of the film, however, takes place years after the event and is a study of how people remember the event and how they come to terms with it (or fail to do so). Imamura raises questions that are pertinent to any study of history: how it is that events become history, how history compares with memory, how our experiences of cataclysmic events correspond to written histories of those events. And he shows that film can be used not simply to recreate events, but to offer perspectives on them that are difficult to achieve in written histories.

Imamura's *Black Rain* should not be confused with the 1989 Ridley Scott film of the same name. That film, also set in Japan, is an ultra-violent Hollywood action-adventure.

The Depiction of History in *Seven Samurai*. *Seven Samurai*, Kurosawa's film about a village that hires several samurai (not seven!) to defend it from bandits, is a remarkable meditation on history. *Seven Samurai* may not be very accurate in depicting late medieval society (the conflicts between peasants and samurai apply much more to the Tokugawa period), but it does focus beautifully on crucial questions for our understanding of that era. In the mythos of Japan, the sixteenth century offers some of the same possibilities as the Western frontier. There are no wide open spaces, but the age is associated with the social and economic freedoms realizable in a realm in upheaval. It is known primarily as a time of warfare and political disorder, but the era also saw the beginnings of the social engineering that would separate warriors from peasants and establish the samurai as a distinct, elite status group. The various conflicts that the film stages—the marauding bandits against the villagers and samurai, the tensions between the samurai and the villagers—are possible for other periods of Japanese period, yet they take on particular importance in this period because the final outcomes are not yet set.

Postwar Exploration of National Identity. *Seven Samurai* is also an eloquent exploration of Japan's postwar situation. Released in 1953, just a year after the end of the American Occupation (and the end of Occupation's proscription on history films), *Seven Samurai* questions how Japan's history might be incorporated into the "new" Japan. Although he is an unabashed fan of the samurai ideal, Kurosawa is sensitive to a key contradiction in the way it has operated in Japanese history. A problem arises because the samurai ideal has been used to embody the essence of "Japaneseness," to be therefore an ethos that everyone ought to acknowledge and observe. Yet it is also an elite ideal, which only a few can in fact follow. The samurai ideal, originally intended for that elite class alone,

became *de facto* an ideology for the entire state. As, from the mid-nineteenth century down through the end of the Pacific War, Japan's modern state regimes embraced and elaborated the ideal, they reproduced the contradiction. And, of course, following the war, in a country struggling to remake itself, the question of where that ideal might fit in a peaceful nation was very much in the air. His choice of a (very) late medieval setting for *Seven Samurai*, seems calculated: an opportunity to revisit the question of what role the martial virtues might play in a society emerging from war and lawlessness by looking back to the period in which the problem originated. *Seven Samurai* uses a specific moment in Japanese history to query the role of elites in an age of commoner values. The film's wistful ending indicates that Kurosawa has not come up with any solutions. In a society returning to normalcy, there is evidently no place for these soldiers, but to go on to lose another battle.

Finding Films for Classroom Use. While *Black Rain* and *Seven Samurai* are appropriate only for older, mature high school students, finding age-appropriate films for younger students is not difficult. Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS), at the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois, offers a searchable database of film and other media for use in the classroom. Users can search by education level and subject for appropriate films. AEMS can also be reached at their toll-free number (1-888-828-AEMS).

Some Resources for Japanese Film:

Asian Educational Media Service (<http://www.aems.uiuc.edu>) has a searchable database designed for educators.

Midnight Eye (www.midnighteye.com) is especially good for contemporary film.

Kinema Club (pears.lib.ohio-state.edu/Markus) is now moribund, but contains a wealth of information about Japanese film, including syllabi, criticism, and a bibliography of books and articles on Japanese film.

On Imamura and *Black Rain*:

Ibuse, Masuji. *Black Rain*. New York: Kodansha America, 1988. (The novel on which the film is based.)

Quandt, James, ed. *Shohei Imamura*. Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 1997.

Dorsey, John T. and Naomi Matsuoka. "Narrative Strategies of Understatement in *Black Rain* as a Novel and a Film." *Hibakusha Cinema*. Ed. Mick Broderick. London: Kegan Paul International, 1996. 203-21.

On Kurosawa and *Seven Samurai*:

Mitsuhiro, Yoshimoto. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. (The best book on Kurosawa in print. Offers analyses of all of Kurosawa's films.)

Mellen, Joan. *Seven Samurai*. London: British Film Institute Press, 2002.

Prince, Stephen. *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991.

Kurosawa, Akira. *Seven Samurai and Other Screenplays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.

Thomas Keirstead is a professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Indiana University.

The National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies is made possible through the generous support of the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership.