

citizens of the town and the supernatural denizens of the forest. In the penultimate scene it appears that the humans and, by implication, the darker side of technology have won out. The town's leader has cut off the head of the forest's reigning deity, and the forest itself begins to destruct before the viewers' eyes in a memorable vision of ecological apocalypse. But Miyazaki goes beyond the erotics of destruction to give us hope. A young boy and girl, the "heroes" of the film, unite to bring back the head of the deity and the forest is renewed. Even in this film, however, a darker cultural sensibility exists as one child, the "princess" of the title who is united with the creatures of the forest, insists that she can never forgive the humans for their crimes against the forest and its inhabitants. The boy insists, however, that the forest will survive, as will the town. The ending does not give us a wedding between the two, despite their obvious love for each other. Instead, the film concludes with the two agreeing to "visit" each other.

While *Princess Mononoke* was the highest grossing film of its year in Japan, in its American release it did not do very well. Many viewers found it too "confusing," since they were unable to decide who were the "good" and who were the "bad," and were disturbed by the film's ambiguous conclusion. But for viewers who are willing to tolerate a vision of a complex world in which good and evil may not be obviously divided and in which technological development brings both tragedy and progress, the film offers the chance to work through these issues at a more complex level than many live action films provide. Japanese animation may at times appear dark and depressing, offering us no escape from the apocalyptic labyrinth of modern technology, but, at its best, it gives us memorable maps to explore that labyrinth and perhaps to understand its hidden passages.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Lifton, "The Image of the End of the World: A Psychohistorical View," in *Apocalypse: End or Rebirth*, eds. Friedland, Holton, Marx, and Skolnikoff. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985. p. 165.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas de Zenotita, "The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic," *Harpers*, vol. 304, No. 1823, April, 2002.

**Eliot Deutsch and Carol Gluck will be  
our Keynoters at the 11th Annual  
Asianetwork Conference in  
Greenville, SC  
April 11-13, 2003**



Photo from "Japanese Film in the Classroom" Panel

### *Japanese Film in the Classroom*

Panel: Mark MacWilliams, Chair, Saint Lawrence University; Joseph Laker, Wheeling Jesuit College; Lee Makela, Cleveland State University

### **Using Feature Films in the Classroom Creatively: Sandakan No. 8 and Modern Japanese History**

**Joseph Laker, Wheeling Jesuit College**

Teaching history through the use of feature films has become more and more popular during the past twenty-five years. Sessions devoted to film history and the interpretation of film have become more numerous at historical conferences. Historical journals have begun to offer regular reviews of both feature and documentary film, and the journal *History Today* has begun to run periodic discussions of film in its "Film in Context" series. Mark Carnes suggests that he had no difficulty getting sixty professors of history to agree to write essays for his collection *Past Imperfect*, which was published in 1995. He notes that most of the historians he spoke with love historical films, even though they are highly critical of the lack of historical accuracy.<sup>1</sup>

The producer/director John Sayles argues that moviegoers, film producers and directors love historical films as well. He states:

There is a certain power that comes from history. I mean, I've heard producers say many, many times that the only way a movie is going to work is if the ad says "based on a true story." Audiences appreciate the fact that something really happened. Whether it did or didn't, they're thinking it did or knowing that it did. That gives the story a certain

legitimacy in the audience's mind, and sometimes in the filmmaker's mind. Whereas if you make something up out of whole cloth, it's not the same.<sup>2</sup>

Mark Carnes claims that "most of us crave to learn from real people who have endured what we fear and done what we dream, whose experiences offer guidance as we seek to understand our place upon this planet."<sup>3</sup>

Yet, film is a dangerous medium. Feature historical films are particularly seductive and frequently help to create and promote racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes or provide false interpretations of an historical event. Leon Litwack argues concerning D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation* that "few if any films in the history of the cinema had such tragic and far reaching consequences. . . . More than any historian or textbook. . . *The Birth of A Nation* molded and reinforced racial stereotypes."<sup>4</sup> Oliver Stone's film *JFK* has rightly been harshly criticized for its numerous historical errors.<sup>5</sup> Since many of our students learn much of what they know of history from movies, we historians have an obligation to help them become critical viewers of film.

According to John Sayles, the way movies are produced and made and the inherent nature of film lead to inevitable distortions of what really happened. One such limitation is that film omits many points of view and tends to oversimplify the complexity of historical events. He argues that:

In a two-hour movie, though it's very, very difficult for an audience to accept or follow more than three points of view (omniscient, protagonist, and antagonist). . . . With these three viewpoints you do a lot, but for an audience that's used to making an emotional connection with a film, it's very, very alienating to have too many points of view and that fact militates against complexity.<sup>6</sup>

Carnes acknowledges the difficulty and claims that "when historians call for 'historical accuracy,' what they want more than precision in details is an acknowledgement of the ambiguity and complexity of the past."<sup>7</sup> Sayles admits that directors often make up or change the facts to be truer to the spirit of the past event or to increase the entertainment value of the film rather than to stick to the historical record. Feature films rarely suggest that there might be more than one reasonable version of the events portrayed in the film.<sup>8</sup> Richard Marius warns that movies have conditioned us to "cast our political and social world in categories of saints and devils."<sup>9</sup>

My colleagues and I have used feature films in most of our courses, and have created a "History Through Film" course. In this course, we have used six or seven full-length feature films. However, during the past two years none of us have taught it. All of us feel that in courses like this, the use of so many films appropriates too much of the course content, lectures, readings, and assignments. As a consequence, the "History Through Film" course has fallen into disfavor and now most of us use, at most, two feature films in a semester

course.

One of my favorite Japanese films is *Sandakan No. 8*, a film which I have used several times in my course: "History of Japan Since 1800." It is this film that I would like to discuss. I use this film because it introduces students to some of the costs of Japan's modernization and expansion in the twentieth century and has great chronological sweep. It also raises a number of thought provoking, highly discussible topics, such as the causes and consequences of poverty, the human costs of prostitution, the unforgiving nature of polite society, and the ethical behavior of journalists and historians who lie and betray others for a story. The film fits neatly into my course and thus supplements rather than determines the course content.

Here, let me briefly discuss how I structure the course. It is broken up into three sections: Tokugawa Japan up to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the industrialization and Westernization of Japan 1868 to 1945, and Japan today. I don't use a standard textbook, but rely upon my lectures to provide students with the chronological outline of modern Japanese history. I want my students to read about the lives of as many Japanese as possible. This semester I have assigned the following four books, with some supplementary readings for the first and third section of the course: Haru Reischauer's *Silk And Samurai* which examines the upper-class in modern Japan, *The Human Tradition in Modern Japan*, edited by Anne Walthall, which includes twelve biographies of mainly middle-class men and women, Yukio Mishima's novel, *Runaway Horses*, which examines a strain of Japanese xenophobia produced by Westernization and modernization; and finally Norma Field's *In the Realm of the Dying Emperor*, which focuses on the careers and contributions of three post-1945 Japanese middle-class individuals. In the past I have used Mikiso Hane's *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts*, but since it is currently out-of-print, I now use Walthall's book. I much prefer Hane's book for a variety of reasons, but mostly because he concentrates on lower-class perspectives and issues and so represents a sharper contrast with Reischauer's volume than the Walthall book does. Hane covers such groups as miners, factory girls, tenant farmers, Koreans, *burakumin*, and prostitutes. Indeed, in his chapter on prostitution, Hane discussed the work of Yamazaki Tomoko's research on the prostitute Osaki, whose life story is the subject of the film *Sandakan No. 8*.

The film begins with a young historian and journalist named Mitani (really Yamazaki) who is visiting the Amakusa islands in southern Japan looking for *karayuki-san*, women who went off to the south seas and worked as prostitutes before World War II. She strikes up a conversation with an old woman in a diner (Osaki) whom she correctly suspects was a *karayuki-san* and decides to learn her story. The first thirty minutes of the film focuses on the growing friendship of the two women; Mitani does not reveal who she is or what she wants. She comes to stay in the squalid home of Osaki and poses, at Osaki's suggestion, as the old woman's daughter-in-law who has come down from Kyoto for a visit. After a lecherous local invades Osaki's home and

unsuccessfully tries to rape Mitani, Osaki begins to reveal her story.

The scene then shifts to Japan at the end of the Meiji era. Osaki and her brother have lost their father and their mother has remarried, but there is no place for them in the new household. Poverty forces the brother to leave for the coal mines and Osaki to sell her services (she thinks as a maid), at the age of ten, to a local boss and procurer named Torazo, who owns Brothel No. 3 in Sandakan on the island of Borneo. For about five years Osaki and several of her friends from home serve as maids in the brothel before they are forced to take customers. Some of the causes, horrors, and human costs of prostitution are exposed in the film.<sup>10</sup>

The scene shifts back and forth between Mitani getting and proving Osaki's story (short segments) and the story itself which features Osaki's hard work to earn money to pay off her debts to her pimp, send money to her brother (he builds a nice house), and her one chance to find true love with a young Japanese man who works on a rubber plantation. He arrives to buy out her contract and marry her just after she has serviced more than thirty Japanese sailors. She is so traumatized by the experience she cannot respond and he leaves. Her pimp dies, and she is rescued from an even worse boss by a Madame Okuni, who runs Brothel No. 8. Okuni is kind and protective of her girls. After Okuni's death, Osaki returns to Japan only to find her ungrateful brother and his wife ashamed of her past and eager for her to move on. She throws away her savings at a wild party and heads off to Manchuria. In Manchuria she marries, has a son, and they all return to Japan at the end of World War II. Her husband soon dies, and when the son decides to marry, he presses her to return to Amakusa so his bride's family will not learn of her sordid past. He sends her a measly 4,000 yen a month so she can eke out a living in her filthy broken-down home filled with cats and vermin.

Eventually Mitani's true identity and purpose are exposed. Mitani helps clean and repair Osaki's home and the two women part in a tearful scene. Mitani proves the accuracy of Osaki's tale by finding Madame Okuni's grave in the jungles near Sandakan, and she pointedly notes that the graves are so positioned that the back of the tombstones face Japan; Kikuo rejects Japan just as Japanese society has rejected and are ashamed of the *Karayuki-san*.

The film is well-directed and nicely paced by Kumai Kei and the acting by the main characters is well done. When I first saw the film, I was quite taken with it, and I completely and uncritically empathized and sympathized with Osaki and the other young women who were forced into prostitution and mistreated by the bosses, relatives, and society itself. When it comes to really good movies, I, like many of my students, often, at least initially, set aside my critical faculties. My students frequently complain that I make watching film less enjoyable by making them critically analyze what they see on the screen.

What I expect in a film to be used in class is a well-directed, well-acted film with a great story and believable characters. It must be rooted in history and raise significant

political, social, and ethical issues. In addition, I want a film where the director falsifies the historical record in some significant ways that can be discovered, so that students can learn to be critical of the historical movies they watch. *Sandakan No. 8* clearly fits my requirements.

Three parts of the film falsify the historical record: the attempted rape of the modern historian/journalist Mitani—which leads Osaki to tell her story, the sense of timing used in the film which sets up causal relationships that in fact do not exist as depicted, and the importance attached to the location and position of Okuni's grave in Sandakan. The attempted rape of Mitani by a lecherous local is not mentioned in Yamazaki's book *Sandakan Brothel No. 8*, and so we can only conclude that it did not really happen. It is fiction, but nonetheless a very useful device to create a bond between the characters Mitani and Osaki and produce the breakthrough that allows Osaki to begin to tell her story.<sup>11</sup>

One of the inevitable consequences of rendering decades of a person's life story into a two hour movie is to collapse events in ways that suggest causal relationships when no such connection existed. This happens repeatedly in *Sandakan No. 8*. To give just a few examples: the film shows the death of Torazo occurring at the time the Japanese fleet visited Sandakan, and Osaki ends up so numbed servicing sailors that her Japanese lover abandons her, and she is then to be sold to another brothel keeper, but she is saved by Okuni. In fact months separated all four of these events and no real causal relationship between them can be established. The film suggests that Osaki is still working at Okuni's brothel when Okuni dies. Such was not the case. By this time she had become the mistress of an English businessman, Mr. Home, who treated Osaki quite generously and made few demands upon her. She remained, however, close to Okuni.<sup>12</sup>

In the film, much is made of the fact that Okuni's grave is located in Sandakan and that the graves were positioned in such a way as to show that Okuni rejected Japan as it rejected the *karayuki-san*. Shortly before she dies Okuni indicates that she never wants to return to Japan and encourages "her girls" to adopt the same attitude. In chapter 9, "Okuni's birthplace," Yamazaki relates that not only was there a gravesite for Okuni in Sandakan, but also one in her hometown. In addition her daughter and granddaughter returned to live in Okuni's hometown. Rejection was less total and more complicated than the film indicates.<sup>13</sup>

To help my students get the most out of the film *Sandakan No. 8*, I distribute a diagram of the chief characters of the film and their relationship to Osaki before the students see the film. After the students see the film they must give me ten questions they would like to ask the characters and the director (four directed to Osaki, three to Mitani, and three to the director). I ask them to read Osaki's story, which is found in Yamazaki Tomoko's book *Sandakan Brothel No. 8*, pp. 45-107. Then, students are to write a short paper of four to five pages discussing two ways in which the text differs from the film. Following submission of the papers, I devote one class period to discussing the film. Finally, students will have to answer a short question dealing with prostitution in

modern Japan on the final exam.

*Sandakan No. 8* is a film that I will continue to use. It raises controversial societal and ethical issues, especially the issue of prostitution, which is a hot topic right now, given the controversy and discussion of the role of the Japanese and American governments in providing “comfort women” to their troops.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark C. Carnes, “Hollywood History,” *American Heritage*, September 1995, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>“A Conversation Between Eric Foner and John Sayles,” *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, edited by Mark Carnes, Henry Holt, 1995, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Carnes, “Hollywood,” p. 83.

<sup>4</sup>Leon F. Litwack, “The Birth of a Nation,” *Past Imperfect*, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Brent Toplin, *History By Hollywood: the Use and Abuse of the American Past*, Univ. Of Illinois Press, 1996, see chapter 3 - “JFK—Fact, Fiction, and Supposition,” 45-78.

<sup>6</sup>“A Conversation”, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>Carnes, “Hollywood,” p. 83.

<sup>8</sup>“A Conversation,” pp. 15-16.

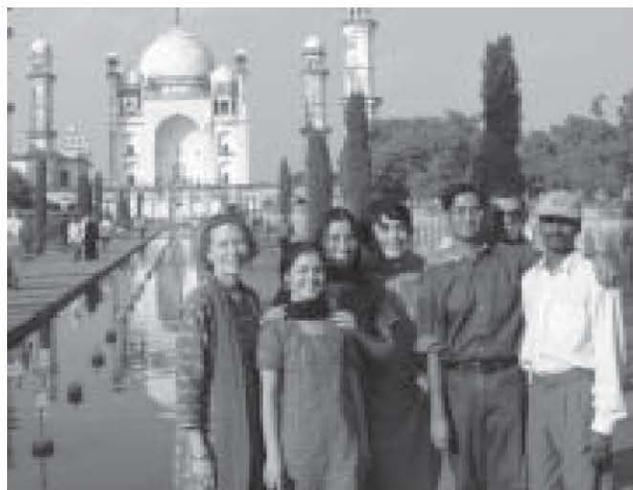
<sup>9</sup>Carnes, “Hollywood,” p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>Yamazaki Tomoko, *Sandakan Brothel No. 8: an Episode in the History of Lower-class Japanese Women*, translated by Karen Colligan-Taylor, M. E. Sharpe, 1999, pp. 45-66 and the film *Sandakan No. 8*.

<sup>11</sup>Yamazaki, 18-45.

<sup>12</sup>Yamazaki, 85-96.

<sup>13</sup>Yamazaki, 146-61.



Cathy Benton and students in India: part of the ASIANetwork Freeman Student-Faculty program

## Teaching the Postmodern Using Examples from Japanese Film and Popular Culture

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### PREFACE

My first encounter with the “postmodern” as a subject of intellectual inquiry came with my reading of Miyoshi Masao and H.D. Harootunian’s *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), an edited collection of articles probing the arrival and influence of this concept in Japan. This initial interaction was prompted by the need to keep abreast of the latest trends in Japanese life and culture for a course I was teaching on contemporary Japan in historical perspective; I came away from the book with enough of an abstract understanding of the notions involved to talk about the subject within the context of my course if asked by students to deal with the principles involved but, I must confess, little more in the way of interest or concern.

Then in 1996, I taught a version of that same course at the Japan Center for Michigan Universities in Hikone (on the shores of Lake Biwa outside Kyoto) while on sabbatical leave. Soo-Kyung Chang, one of my students from Korea, brought me a video by the Japanese film director Shunji Iwai which she insisted I view as an example of the abstract concept we had touched on briefly in class the previous day. I was completely captivated by the film and thereupon began a quest for not only other works by the same director but other examples of “postmodernism” within the general arena of contemporary Japanese popular culture.

Soon enough I was awash in the recommended works by film makers, authors, musicians and various other artists brought to my attention by well-meaning friends and students. And I was hooked! In early 1997 I presented a paper on Shunji Iwai at a conference on Japanese Popular Culture held at the University of British Columbia.<sup>1</sup>

The next issue I had to face was how best to integrate this newly-fascinating subject matter (for me, at least) more fully and completely into my undergraduate courses. I began to search for selected examples among my assembled resources that could be effectively used to introduce, define and illustrate the facets of the postmodern phenomenon within the context of contemporary Japanese popular culture. The resulting “learning package” became an integral part of two different courses: one, my ongoing exploration of contemporary Japanese culture in historical perspective; the second, a contribution to a team-taught course on “Power and Authority in Nonwestern Societies.”

In the classroom I chose to approach the subject matter from two distinct perspectives. The first built on already-developed concepts associated with the interplay between “tradition” and “modernization,” illustrating “the postmodern” as an attempt to break away from the paradigm linking the traditional to the contemporary through the process of “growth and change within a cultural tradition” (my basic definition of the modernization process). My