

Apanese cinema and western audiences

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Japanese Cinema and Western Audiences: Why a Foreknowledge of Japan's Social, Cultural and Historical Background Is a Necessity in Order to " Properly" Appreciate Japanese Cinema and Western Audiences: Why a foreknowledge of Japan's social, cultural and historical background is a necessity in order to " properly" appreciate Japanese Cinema. Discuss the claim that Japanese cinema cannot be properly understood by Western audiences without a wider understanding of Japanese history, culture and society.

In this essay I intend to prove that a foreknowledge of Japan's social, cultural and historical background is a necessity in order to " properly" appreciate Japanese Cinema. With reference to films such as *Ugetsu Monogatari* and *Tokyo Story*, my aim is to use my illustrative examples, analysis and references to scholarly sources to clearly show that in order to " properly" understand Japanese Cinema, a foreknowledge of Japanese history, culture and society is a definite requirement a western audience. The concept of world cinema has become commercially a genre. This genre creates the concept of the ' other'; this is because it is other to what a western audience is used to (which is Hollywood or European cinema). It is also categorized as " third cinema", with " first cinema" being Hollywood. This grouping normally means that the film is in a foreign language (non-english), it is culturally specific to the culture that produces it and is pre-occupied with culture and history or specific social and political ideas. These forms of categorization alone are evidence that western audiences consider Japanese cinema outside of their understanding of traditional cinema.

To begin the argument we can relate to one significant theorist. Donald Richie moved to Japan during the occupation in order to study Japanese films, in order to gain an understanding of the Japanese national character, to assist in defeating the Japanese military forces. In his long stay in Japan, he familiarized himself with Japanese theatre, art, culture, cinema and society. This allowed him to play the role of “ mediator” between Japanese cinema and the west” Without Richie’s knowledge of Japanese culture, history and society, his appreciation for Japanese cinema would be sparse. Fumiaki Itakura commented on Western audiences “ Japaneseness” was invented just one hundred years ago, and were based on cultural nationalism. They are not likely to understand the ideology of this “ Japaneseness. ” It is clear that Japanese cinema is too culturally specific for a western audience to ‘ fully’ appreciate.

Kenji Mizoguchi’s films have been put forward by critics and scholars as perhaps the most culturally specific Japanese films. His film “ Ugetsu Monogatari” (1953) is a Jidai-geki film, (a period drama) for which he has become recognised as an auteur. Themes revolving around wealth, family and spirituality play a main role in the film. Freda Freinberg described the film as “ Totally other to the world we knew” in relation to western audiences. The geisha dance scene would be completely disregarded by a western audience. Firstly her singing is very culturally specific, and is a Japanese form of chanting. According to Leger Grindon in reference to the “ Realms of the Senses” , the geisha functions as a sign of the Japanese forbidden, and the surrender of emotions in replacement of sexual passion.

Genjuro has left his wife, and is being seduced by Lady Wakasa. The camera work is very insignificant to how the dance is portrayed. The camera stays at a mid-shot whilst she performs, only following her movement. The dance is a Japanese traditional dance, it's very slow paced, as she dances she waves a fan. During this scene the attention is never on Genjuro. We can see in back ground of the shot that he is hypnotised by her dancing. Mizouchi wants the audience main focus to be on the dance.

The traditional dance and song of this scene is very culturally specific, a western audience would not be able to “ properly” appreciate it without a foreknowledge of Japanese Culture. The most significant part of this scene is the voice of her father. A low chant begins to accompany Lady Wakasa singing, this shocks the mistress and stops her from singing. The camera is still only focused on Lady Wakasa, the audience don't see where the voice is coming from. The camera then pans slowly to their statue. Lady Wakasa falls to Genjuro using very exaggerated and expressive movement. This is inspired by traditional Kabuki theatre, which a western audience wouldn't appreciate without foreknowledge.

Lady Wakasa claims that it's the voice of her late father. He is expressing his happiness for his daughter. These strong spiritual and religious themes are common in Japanese culture. Buddah, evil spirits, the omen, ghosts and after life are all common themes of Japan's beliefs of spirituality. Leger Grindon comments on religion that “ in few cultures is it taken seriously and as it as much a part of daily life as in Japan. This scene would be disregarded, and not ‘ properly’ appreciated by a western audience, without a further insight

to Japanese culture. Lady Wakasa's spirit is used as a representation of Japan's past.

Genjuro is seduced by a spirit, this is a representation of being seduced to return to their fugal past. i Here Mizoguchi is using form to represent the past. A understanding of Japanese History is significant when viewing Japanese Cinema. In " Ugetsu Monogatari" there is a lot of narrative revolved around Tobei, who longs to be a Samurai, as it is a respected role society. The samuri status has also been criticized in " Life of Oharu", as Oharu is disgraced by her family due to falling in love with a Samurai, which leads to her fate of prostitution. In " Ugetsu Monogatari" Tobei's spots a famous general's vassal behead his lord. Mizoguchi's use of camera work means that the beheading is hidden from the shot.

The main focus is not on the camera work and editing, (as it does in Hollywood) instead the camera work works around the action. Long takes and wide shots allow the action to tell the story. This gives the impression that we are viewing the scene in real time. Critic Freda Freiberg stated that " Mizoguchi is one of the masters of the long take. " A long take, pans out from the vassal as he begins to walk away. Dues to Tobei's desperation to become a samurai, he kills the vassal and steals the head. To a western audience the idealisation of the samurai would not be understood without a wider understanding of Japans history.

This means that an audience could not ' properly' appreciate the film without a foreknowledge of Japans history. Yasujiro Ozu has been considered by David Bordowell as " quintessentially Japanese" . His films are made up of

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small domestic stories, shot mainly in interior sets. Unlike the Hollywood system, Ozu prioritised space over narrative. In his film “Tokyo Story” (1953), he directly confronts the idea of where Japan is going after the war, in terms of national identity. He effectively documents a Japanese life at this time, and touches on the idea of society changing through their past, present and future. Tokyo Story really deals with three generations passing through life, but mostly with the generation that is passing out of it.

The scene when the grand parents arrive at the house, they enter wearing traditional Kimonos and bow when greeting. This juxtaposes with their son who is dressed in a suit. Already we can see the grand father and the son playing representation of the changing generations: the grandfather representing the past, and his son of the present. In another scene, the grandson is pictured studying English at a desk, wearing a baseball cap. This representation, as small as it is, shows the future for Japan and where it is headed. Baseball is an American sport that was adapted by the Japanese during the occupation. Also, by sitting the boy at a desk, Ozu is making a statement about what Japan’s future holds, in this he is relating to westernization.

Relating to westernization is a common idea in Japanese films. For instance Seijun Suzuki’s “Tokyo Drifter” features night clubs influenced by western music, and even involves western characters in one of his scenes, making a statement about Japanese westernization. All of these representations would mean nothing to a western audience without foreknowledge of Japan’s social traits. In a later scene feature the grand

father and his friends, he says “ young people today have no backbone, where is their spirit? ” He is touching on younger generation having no ambitions, and how times are changing. Ozu’s films commonly deal with role reversals, mostly between generations. As example the scene where the grandmother wishes to spend time with her grandchildren, we can see that the mother has little control over her son. He spins around in his chair and kicks his legs about as his mother tries to convince him to accompany his grandmother.

At the end of the scene the mother (Fumiko), gives in and leaves her son to spin in his chair. In the case of the grandparents, their children are to preoccupied with their own lives to spend time with them, instead they send them away to a spa. These are two examples of how roles have been reversed, with younger generations gaining the most control. This is a representation of where Japan is headed, and that it’s in the hand of the younger generation. Without a previous understanding of the Japanese social state, a western audience would not be able to ‘ properly’ appreciate the film to it’s fullest. Women’s status in society is commented on in the film, how their roles are changing. Noriko is seen working a desk job, she lives by herself and is only dependant on herself.

She is seen throughout the film in a skirt and shirt, rather than the traditional Kimono. This is stating how women’s roles are changing. However Noriko appears to be clinging on the memory of her late husband. The grandmother asks of her to move on from the memory of her son, and find another partner. Socially, Japanese have presented a hierarchy with the male above

the female. This is a dominant theme in "Ugetsu Monogatari" and "Life of Oharu"(1958) women are left in ruins because their man has abandoned them. In "Tokyo Story" it presents a modern picture of women in society, and show that although their roles may have changed, they still are classed below men.

Noriko is still dependant on her husband, even after his death. Kishi Matsuo commented on women's role in society " comparing today with the Ginkgo and Nara periods, I don't find much difference, women have always been treated like slaves. " Without a wider understanding of Japanese society, the representation of women would be misunderstood. What the analysis of Mizoguchi's "Ugetsu Monogatari" and Ozu's "Tokyo Story" has clearly shown is that it is entirely right to claim that Japanese cinema cannot be properly understood by Western audiences without a wider understanding of Japanese country's history, culture and society. Japanese cinema is too culturally specific that a western audience wouldn't be able to ' properly' appreciate it. Japanese history, culture and society are all commented on throughout Ozu and Mizoguchi's films. The content of this essay has explained that what is being commented on is too complex for a western audience, meaning they could not ' properly' appreciate these films, and Japanese cinema overall.