“Second and Third Thoughts about the Japanese Film”
-Joseph L. Anderson

“Second and Third Thoughts about the Japanese Film” isn’t an essay that is heavy on theory; rather, it is more of a summary of several aspects of the Japanese film industry with J. L. Anderson’s opinion laced into it. Anderson identifies what he considers to be elements of Japanese film in the four parts of his essay: “In Praise of Benshi,” “Glimmers of Cosmos,” “Two Influences and the Japanese Film,” and “On or Down the Tube,” with each section focusing on a different topic.

Part one, “In Praise of Benshi,” is a quick summary of the different aspects of the benshi. Anderson begins this part by asserting the superiority of the benshi over the film, he states that “the pre-talkie film of Japan was not an independent visual medium but an element of live performance” (Anderson 440), and he claims that the film was merely a prop for the benshi’s storytelling (Anderson 439). The fact that Anderson refers to the benshi as storytellers catches my attention, because the benshi were often referred to as narrators or explainers by writers like Jeffrey A. Dym, Hideaki Fujiki, and Abé Mark Nornes, just to name a few. And as narrators or explainers, the benshi’s job was to explain the moving pictures on screen. However, Anderson flips this around to say that the film served as an enhancement to the benshi’s storytelling.

Anderson further emphasizes on this storytelling aspect of the benshi by speaking about the benshi’s vocal styles and how it stemmed from “the wide range of solo performer storyteller traditions of Japan” (Anderson 440). Here he wanted to point out that the vocal styles of the benshi originated from storytelling techniques, and I suspect this is to further convince us that the benshi were more like storytellers than narrators.

The subheading “Glimmers of Cosmos” isn’t very telling in concerns to the Japanese silent film industry, but the argument that stood out the most to me in this section is that during the silent film era, retelling familiar tales better than they were told before was a more prized talent than coming up with original stories. Of course, originality wasn’t discouraged. As long as the teller remains accurate to facts, “suggests imaginative truths, confronts the duality of good and evil, and reveals the human soul,” then he may take as many liberties as he desires with the story (Anderson 448).

Like the subheading says, “Two Influences and the Japanese Film,” the third section is about two types of films and the influence these films had on the Japanese public. The first was Bluebird Photoplays, which were light melodramas that revealed emotional and moral possibilities that feudally based Kyuha and Shimpa films did not have (Anderson 448). Bluebird Photoplays introduced films with a new flavor to the Japanese public. These films focused on the more mundane, emotional and realistic side of life. Bluebird Photoplays led into gendai-geki or “Kidoism.” There are two major genres under the category of gendai-geki, which includes melodrama and shoshimin-geki, meaning drama about the common people. These two genres of dramas conveyed “philosophies about suffering and happiness, tears and laughter, ideals and realities” (Anderson 451). Kidoism is still prevalent in home dramas of present day Japan.

Wrapping up the silent film era in section four, “On or Down the Tube,” the focus shifts to televisions. At first, television only contained small studio dramas, imported American Western shows, and sit-com series (Anderson 451). In the mid-1960s, domestically produced television shows increased and drove out foreign product. By 1970, ninety-five percent of all households in Japan owned a television set (Anderson 451). As more and more households
installed televisions sets, attendance at movie theaters steadily declined. Movie theaters went, figuratively, “down the tube,” as more dramas became available “on the tube.”

Reviewed by Melissa Yang