“Mediators of Modernity: “Photo-interpreters” in Japanese Silent Cinema”
-Isolde Standish

Standish describes the role of the benshi/katsuben as “photo-interpreters” (Standish 93), and as interpreters the benshi have a certain amount of freedom in their interpretations. It is not clear whether Standish believes this makes the benshi an oral artist or not, but she does believe that the benshi is “an excellent example of the processes of modification and alteration to the introduction of new technologies, and the adaptation of local populations to the accompanying introduction of new worldviews” (Standish 93). Now, that sounds convoluted, but Standish basically breaks down her article into two main parts. One part of her article talks about the benshi as being “mediators of modernity through their interpretation of foreign films for Japanese audiences,” (Standish 93) and the other part of her article explores the role of the benshi within the domestically produced melodramatic genres and how the inclusion of the benshi “as a central element of the film experience impacted the development of cinematic conventions in these [melodramatic] genres” (Standish 93).

Standish begins the body of her article by saying that technology is produced on the basis of humans’ social conceptions of the world and how we perceive it (Standish 94). When film was created, it was used to represent “life as it is” (Standish 95), and also as a way to exploit the technology in the economic sphere. The film wasn’t created for artistic means. It wasn’t until later, when film techniques such as close-ups and angles were developed did film take a turn for the artistic, and the benshi followed this trend. In the beginning, the benshi merely served as explainers of the film technology, but as the filming industry evolved and stories on film became more elaborate, the benshi’s explanations for the film content also expanded. This is how I interpreted Standish argument that benshi were mediators of modernity. They, the benshi, developed their explanation techniques with the progression of film and communicated this change to the audience through their explanations, or setsumei.

As the article progresses, Standish talks about camera lens, and as someone who has never studied film technology, I am lost in this section. I didn’t really understand how this information about different lens type contributed to her argument, but even without understanding this part, I think you can still get a good enough understanding of her points.

Next, Standish moves on to talking about the benshi in relation to the then emerging genre, melodrama, in Japan. In these domestically produced melodramas, the benshi’s role went beyond just interpreting and elaborating on intertitles, they served as a “stream of consciousness” narration (Standish 100). Melodramas differed from older film genres in its use of cinematic techniques, such as “point-of-view, flashbacks, hallucinations, and imaginings,” (Standish 100) that helped to portray the characters emotions in a way that older films couldn’t convey. This helped created characters with interesting psychological depth. The benshi played an important role in conveying the deeper psychological aspects of melodrama through their narration of the story, direct dialogue of the characters, and most importantly, voice-over narration that conveyed the characters inner thoughts and emotional state.

After giving this summary of the benshi’s role in melodramatic films, Standish focused on individual melodramas, such as Orochi (1925) and Orizuru Osen (The Down fall of Osen), to elaborate on and to show the benshi’s changing role in this new film genre.

From my understanding of this article, Standish’s main argument is that the benshi were needed as mediators between the new and foreign films and the Japanese audiences (Standish 98). Occasionally Standish gets too caught up in talking about filming techniques and film
technology, and I feel that this hinders her arguments. To me, her interest in film technology, especially camera lenses, makes her writing superfluous. Instead, she should be more direct about expressing her thoughts and opinions, which would deliver a stronger and more concise argument.

Reviewed by Melissa Yang