

講義紹介

Film and Culture in Translation: Teaching Hollywood's Golden Age in Japan

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When I first realized that I would be lecturing at Kwansei Gakuin University with someone translating my words into Japanese, I wondered how that would work. No one has ever translated my words (as far as I know), and certainly not week after week for 90 minutes at a time. It turned out to be a fantastic experience, and even better, an illuminating one. Since my Fulbright proposal focused on “Film and animation in translation: Conversations between the U.S. and Japan,” it was indeed a perfect opportunity to reflect on how that works.

My Fulbright project takes as its premise that film is an international culture and that from early on filmmaking as a global presence has offered an important way to explore the perspectives and experiences of other cultures and understand our relationship with them. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*: “We wouldn’t recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination.... evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And that alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships” (29). Film studies classes take into account the importance of storytelling, how and why a story is told (narrative structure, aesthetics, historical and philosophical imperatives), and what that says about the people telling it (cultural and social contexts). Focusing on how stories and styles are interpreted differently in our two national contexts is an excellent way to learn about what it means to be American versus Japanese and how to define our connections. Additionally, interpretation is both an individual and cultural act, and the more diverse the exchange, the more enlightening the outcome can be. For me to be part of such a conversation means a transformation and refinement of my own vision and understanding of the world as well as that of the students I teach. In this process we generate new knowledge through our group interactions, unique understandings that only exist because the class exists, and these intercultural exchanges are

indeed fundamental for the continued functioning of our world.

There is an especially rich interchange between the U.S. and Japan, despite, or perhaps because of our intertwined and sometimes traumatic histories. American film has influenced and been influenced by Japanese film in multiple ways. Thus the “American Cultural History: America and the Golden Age of Hollywood” course introduced students to American film and its contexts in the early part of the twentieth century and allowed for consideration of reception and connection with Japan as well. The course focused on classical Hollywood cinema and the “Golden Age of Hollywood” within the larger context of American cultural history in the 20th century. Hollywood’s golden age—primarily the 1930s and 1940s—is bounded by the advent of sound and the gradual triumph of television over the grand spectacle of the screen. It is a period marked by the Great Depression, westward migration and war as well as a massive studio system that extended to the monopolization of theaters and distribution, a period of strict censorship defined by the Hayes code, advancing technology, and a codification of storytelling techniques that continue to influence and define film on a global scale. The course investigated the various cultural realities and filmic codes and styles that define this period and focused on typical genres such as comedies, fantasy, musicals, war films, and film noir. In addition, we contextualized the period by examining what came before (silent films and Pre-Code Hollywood), and how various directors worked to establish their own vision within the restraints of national censorship. We began by watching early silent comedies by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, discussed a number of classics like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, and *Citizen Kane*, and explored lesser known but equally brilliant films like *Fury*, *The Docks of New York*, and *Gold Diggers of 1933*. We finished the class with *Singin’ in the Rain*, and a backwards glance at early Hollywood from the vantage point of the 1950s.

I offered a course on the Golden Age of Hollywood because I love the cinema and culture of the early twentieth century, and understanding historical differences is just as important as exploring contemporaneous cultural differences. I also focused on this period because most people don’t know enough about the brilliant movies made during this time. Or if they do—like *The Wizard of Oz*—it is primarily through the lens of childhood. Not that this lens isn’t an important one; it is. But one pair of glasses is never enough for a lifetime. While the class was a general overview of the era and cultures, my scholarly interests certainly guided the choices I

made. A course is not only a portrait of the subject, time and place, but also a portrait of the individual who structures it. Thus, we focused not only on the movies themselves, the actors who starred in them, and the directors who constructed them, but also the cultural forces which created them and which they also affected. The story I wished to tell was one that included politics, aesthetics, and the struggles of a new nation working through modernization, economic depression, racial inequality, immigration, and war while making great aesthetic and technical achievements.

In the process of telling this story, I was faced with some new challenges: how to help someone translate it into a different cultural and linguistic context, how to lecture without my usual conversational give and take with my audience, and how to anticipate what would be clear about American culture and what would require more elaboration and background. It was an imperfect process, as all teaching is, and yet a fascinating one. During this process I discovered new things about American culture and movies, new things about Japanese culture and how a Japanese audience experiences early American films, and even new things about myself and my relationship to the films I was teaching. Here are a few of those insights.

Sullivan's Travels

I began the class by talking about where I was from: my roots, and the ways in which I view my home as something in the past, something that is as representational as a painting. Like the movies we were watching, the city I grew up in no longer exists in the same ways, and the culture I was born into exists only in memories, as something I can view in my mind like a film. In addition, the period of film that I was teaching was a time when my grandparents were in their youth: my knowledge of the period came not only from reading about it, or watching movies, but also from hearing stories told by my family. By the time we reached the 1950s in film, I was also entering my parent's childhood and youth. So for me, this class uniquely combined my reading of films as a scholar with that of an individual: it became much more personal.

After my introduction to the class, I moved into my scholarly interests in relation to film and cultural history, which focus on modernity and urban experience and the ways in which power is exercised in public venues and areas of concentrated populations. As a period in American history that is quite transformative in terms of the country moving from a more

isolated national force to a global superpower, the movies provide key insights into the national character, interests and obsessions of a pivotal moment. Thus, when I teach a movie like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca*, I think about how power is represented and what the characters signify in broad national terms. But as I was adding in context for the films this time, I also began to say and think more about the stories as individual expressions of how Americans were challenged to live in their own country. Through the process of explaining their motivations to the students, I realized my own connection to those experiences as well, as an individual and in terms of my family history. It came as a bit of surprise to me how much the stories I was watching and explaining were versions of the ones I grew up hearing about, or how I was seeing myself in the character of Dorothy—someone I had never really identified with before as she was so anxious to get back home, and I never was. Why go back to Kansas?

Like Dorothy, I grew up in the Midwest, and my roots are in small Midwestern cities; I had extended family who were farmers, and grandparents who moved from small town to big city to small town. Moving, in fact, was a mainstay of my family's ongoing experiences, whether it was within the United States, or emigrating from countries like Sweden and England. Traveling and immigration became a main focus of the class, not only in terms of larger social patterns and the formation of Hollywood, but in terms of seeing my own heritage played out for me on the big screen. I have traveled extensively and I am probably unusual in that I have lived in the east, west, south and north of the U.S. and visited 49 of the 50 states. In this sense I have definitely inherited the spirit of exploration that brought my great-grandmother as a teenager from Stockholm to New York or rode the rails with my grandfather in the 1930s. While watching *Sullivan's Travels* I was reminded of his haphazard journey during the Great Depression—a family legend that remains mysterious because he never fully reported on his travels.

Teaching this continual process of journey and return was also a good way into explaining the diversity of America for those who see it primarily as a singular unit. This is a problem that faces us all as we look from the outside of a culture in—and cultural diversity in America is especially complex in that so many people come from elsewhere and the country is so large. So not only did we watch films that are set in different parts of the country and in different periods (*Gone With The Wind*, *Spellbound*, *Citizen Kane*), we watched films that examined the role of the traveler (*Sullivan's Travels*, *Fury*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) and the interplay

between outsider and insider that their unique perspective creates. In teaching these stories about American film and history, it was perhaps inevitable for me to think of my own position here in Japan: I became curious about equivalent movies and moments as we progressed through the semester.

Some of those moments I am already familiar with, especially when it comes to movies, but I know very little about Japanese immigration to the U.S., for example. Living in San Francisco was quite a formative inspiration for me to come to Japan, as I spent a lot of time in Japan Town there, shopping at Kinokuniya and eating sushi and ramen. Seeing the Kobe Immigrants Memorial made me think more concretely in terms of how there were also Japanese explorers who shaped the places I have lived in. We all have stereotypes about each other, and it is easy to miss out on the true cultural diversity inherent in all nations. One of the most delightful things about teaching here is to slowly see that understanding of diversity unfold: to see differences between places and cultural heritage. Kyoto and Osaka, for example, or Sapporo and Nishinomiya. It reminds me that amidst the fragmentation of modern life and the disassociation of global understanding, some things are clearly rooted. In *Sullivan's Travels*, John L. Sullivan seeks out experiences and peoples who he knows little about, and each time he journeys into the unknown believing that he gets it, he is wrong. It is only on his final journey, which he enters into fully unprepared, that he finally opens up to the otherness he seeks to understand. So it has been for me in Japan: the unexpected encounters are the richest and most rewarding.

Modern Times

Each week I received comments from students about the movies. These were very illuminating. Some were about the basics of communication: not being able to understand completely, or having a question about how or why something happened. There were also comments about the success of communication: learning or realizing something. There was enjoyment and puzzlement and even distress. These comments allowed me to discover new connections together with students and colleagues. One interesting discovery for me came from a viewing of the final scene from Harold Lloyd's film *Safety Last!* The film was part of a class on comedy in the 1920s that also included Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Chaplin and Lloyd were very popular in Japan in the 1920s, which can be attested to by their permeation of popular culture and commodities: Harold Lloyd glasses and Charlie Chaplin caramels, for

example. The two were major symbols of American modernity and their films were responsible for disseminating and popularizing American culture in Japan. Serendipitously, films by Lloyd and Chaplin were even being screened in Kyoto during the semester. They represented cultural progress at the time and still connote the pinnacle of American achievement; the scene we watched was in fact a visual metaphor for climbing the ladder of success.

In *Safety Last!*, Lloyd famously scales the side of a tall building while getting into all kinds of near escapes from falling to certain death. His feat is filmed through a combination of physical daring and technical manipulation and his foolish and spectacular climb encapsulates the excitement and dangers of modern life and the crazy economic bubble of the 1920s. Thus, for me the scene is about comedy as metaphor and the adaptation of physical comedy to film. But some students actually reacted to the scene primarily as horror: the reality of his thrilling climb is also frightening, and not funny at all if seen from another point of view. That perspective is one that would not have occurred to me before, but it underscores the deep connection between comedy, human frailty and the alienation produced by modern culture. Lloyd enacts the precarious nature of existence as a man alone and unsupported by friends, family, or even physical reality. His journey up the side of the building is a prophetic example of the crash to come.

This is further emphasized in the film we began the course with: Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. This film still conveys with clarity and wit the problems of mechanization and physical alienation: the body's loss of control, commodity dehumanization, and the pressures of constant surveillance. In the film these pressures result in Chaplin's mental breakdown, a process that is also hilarious and cathartic and full of play and fun. It abruptly occurred to me while watching the film with the students how very American Chaplin's rebellion against authority was. The scene very much critiques conformity (portraying workers as sheep) and the idea of company before individual (Chaplin eventually sabotages the entire operation of the factory). Yet everyone enjoyed the scene immensely: and this was true of Chaplin's work when it first came to Japan in the 1920s. Perhaps this is because Chaplin's rebellion is not angry or even intentional. He is a small person reacting to being a cog in a machine whose gross materialism tramples the human soul. He does so with a quirkiness and playfulness that emphasizes connections between people as an essential part of the human experience rather than showcasing resistance as a will to power. In fact, the movie suddenly reminded me of

Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*. Chaplin's work is just as sentimental as it is satirical. And let's face it, Chaplin is *kawaii*: he is, after all, a bit like a cute hamster with a moustache.

The Crowd

Another interesting concept that developed differently for me as I taught the class was that of the crowd. The subject of *crowds* versus individuals is central to much of my work since I write about the problems of fascism and antifascism during the WWII period. There are many kinds of crowds and groups portrayed in American films in the 1920s and 1930s. They can be negative: for example, the bustling and brutal crowd in *The Crowd*, the lynch mob in *Fury*, the mindless sheep of *Modern Times*. But there are also more positive portrayals of groups of people: the boys working together for truth in the press in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the prisoners and church members enjoying a movie in *Sullivan's Travels*. While individualism is often seen as stereotypical of American thinking, American society does not preclude community or organization, or even crowds or mob mentality. Thus we watched how groups vs. individuals are portrayed visually in the films, and examined images of crowds as representing ideas about democracy.

In *Sullivan's Travels*, for example, we see a very positive depiction of community and social harmony, and it is found in an unusual place for 1930s films. In the scene where the African American church members generously welcome the prisoners in for a movie night, we see how diverse groups can harmonize through enjoyment and laughter. While watching a cartoon with these others, Sullivan realizes that comedy can unite people as powerfully as shared purpose does. We see in the shots of individual faces a likeness and commonality of focus that aligns disparate individuals who exist outside the national 'norm' in a cathartic release of difference and isolation. On the other hand, in *Fury*, a small town, close-knit, homogenous community is revealed to be full of cowardice and hatred towards others. Suspicions based on ignorance lead to the burning of an innocent man, and the film reveals how individuals moving together as a singular unthinking force—a mob—can easily produce destruction. In contrast to *Sullivan's Travels*, *Fury's* close-ups of individuals reveal the deep psychological damage created by pushing others outside the bounds of human community.

Further films depict individual selfishness giving way to personal sacrifices for the greater good of a community or nation, as with Rick in *Casablanca*. Other films portray rampant

individualism as ruthless and (self)-destructive: Kane in *Citizen Kane*, Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*. None of the films celebrate a stereotypically American love of individualism. One student commented about *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, for example, that fighting authority seemed typically American. This seems true to me, and I had not thought about it in quite those terms, but in contemplating this further I realized that the resistance to authority in the film is focused on that authorities' abuse of democratic process. What seemed more *ideally* American about Mr. Smith was his belief that government should represent the desires of the people. Yet something struck me in particular while viewing the end of the film this time. The movie ends with something tragically American: using a gun to solve a problem. Although Senator Paine fails to shoot himself and must confess his crimes, Jefferson Smith symbolically collapses in the end and is carried out of the room as if dead. The film ends almost wildly, with Smith's inert body exiting as we hear a gleeful yelp from his secretary and fiancé Clarissa Saunders. I realized, for the first time, while viewing this film in Japan and trying to deepen my understanding of its representation of the individual will, how much it resembles a western at the end with a showdown and yippies from the bystanders.

Thus, the process of watching and teaching these movies in Japan, and being able to see and think of them through the presence and vision of others, has taught me more about the cultures of both Japan and America. It has also reinforced for me how important it is for all of us to watch movies together; to think and talk about them together; to listen to and tell stories together. To ask questions, to be curious, and to explore.

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