Panel 8: Film

Rea Amit, Yale University
"The Japanese Postwar Religious Blockbuster"

Abstract: Only little thought had been given thus far to Japanese popular cinema as a reflection of the country’s indigenous aesthetics. While much attention had been drawn to films made by directors such as Kurosawa Akira, Mizoguchi Kenji, and Ozu Yasujiro, many locally successful films remain understudied. Among these many films, is the subgenre; the religious epic. Pertaining to this category in the postwar era are films such as Nichiren to moko daishurui (Watanabe Kunio, 1958), Shaka (Mishumi Kenji, 1961), Nichiren (Nakamura Noboru, 1979), Shinran shiroi michi (Mikuni Rentaro, 1987), and Zen (Takahashi Banmei, 2009). These films are historical biographies of famous religious figures, but they differ from the gidaigeki genre, under which most historical films fall, since they are set in times earlier than the Edo period. In my paper I intend to first introduce some of the films and their shared cinematic style. This, I will go on to argue, is an example of an aesthetic that stems from a new conception of the nation in the postwar era. I will focus my discussion on the first three films mentioned above, as films produced by Daiei Production Company. These films were shot not as works of a single auteur director, but rather as religious products promoted by the studio president, Nagata Masaichi, himself a Nichiren follower. Thus, I will make the connection between cinematic expression, and the nation, but also between genre and production factors with religious rhetoric.

Kelly Hansen, San Diego State University
"Gendered Chronotope in Mizoguchi Kenji’s Gion no shimai"

Abstract: This paper examines the gendered chronotope of Mizoguchi Kenji’s 1936 film Gion no shimai (Sisters of the Gion) in conjunction with Alexander Kuprin’s 1915 Russian novel Yama (The Pit), the inspiration for Yoda Yoshikata’s script of the film. Although the plot outline of Gion bears little resemblance to Kuprin’s work, it does effectively reproduce the chronotopical framework of the novel, namely the futility of female agency and action in gendered demimonde space. Drawing on Bakhtinian theory of genre, characterized as a dialogic and intertextually-based, this study considers how the treatment of time and space in relation to cultural-historical conditions in these works contributes to the perceived ideologies which are an intrinsic component of the gendered chronotope. I begin by examining the regionally-constructed interconnectedness of time and space. Despite the geographical disparities between a Russian brothel in a lively port city and the narrow, confining alleys and interiors of Gion, both effectively depict the constriction of space which highlight the unique social conventions that define and limit the female characters’ lives. Second I consider the manner in which the naturalist-style prose of Kuprin is reflected through the local Kyoto dialect and cinematic “rhetoric” of Mizoguchi’s trademark camerawork, creating voyeuristic perspectives that parallel the mundane realism of Kuprin’s work. Finally, I discuss the conclusion of the film. Although frequently criticized as stylistically and/or thematically inconsistent, this interpretation will illustrate how the elements of the final scene can be harmoniously integrated through the ideological framework of the gendered chronotope.

Naoki Yamamoto, Yale University
"Toward a Socialist Epistemology of Wartime Japan: Tosaka Jun’s Writings on Film"

Abstract: This paper examines how the increasing popularity of news films in the mid-to-late 1930s, a phenomenon that cannot be inseparable from the Japan’s full-fledged participation in the war against China, stimulated the desire of Japanese intellectuals to theorize cinema’s ability to mediate the masses and their everyday life. Needless to say, it was major film critics like Iwasaki Akira and Imamura Taihei who led the debates by discussing the government’s propagandistic use of non-fiction genres. This paper, however, sheds light on Marxist philosopher Tosaka Jun’s unique but less known take on this issue, in an attempt to draw attention from a broader range of audience. Tosaka’s writings on film were limited in number but constituted a major part of his theory of social epistemology. In his view, news film is far more significant than other tools of mass communication, as it allows the viewers to directly grasp the social fabrication of the world in motion. But equally at stake in his speculation is that even news or non-fiction film had its own mode of expression, and thus itself being a visual rhetoric of the twentieth century at large. By closely reading his seminal essays like “Cinema’s Realistic Properties and Its Popularity” (1936), this paper elucidates how Tosaka developed his own media theory in a way similar to Benjamin and other contemporary thinkers. At the same time, it also highlights the continuing relevance of Tosaka’s epistemological vocation to today’s mediascape, where all types of representation should be addressed critically and reflectively.

Komei Amemiya, Ritsumeikan University
"Cinematic locality and movie criticism between “Prokino” and “Workers Film and Photo League”"

Abstract: This paper is an exploration of cinematic locality and movie criticism between two Labor film unions. In 1931, Harry Potamkin who was the leader of American Labor film union “Workers Film and Photo League” sent a mail to the Japanese labor film union “Prokino”. Both groups shared the same topic which was filming the problems of proletarian workers between the 1920’s and 1930’s. “Prokino” had a most original filming style: that of filming by small gauge camera. Sasa Genju (佐々元十) who was a critic of “Prokino”, argued for filming by small gauge camera in his cinematic article “Toy / Weapon / Camera”(1928), stating the small gauge camera’s low production costs and high standard of photography as the key benefits. It was only this way that “Prokino” produced original labor Films. The activity of “Prokino” is also reported in Berlin by the journal of Senda Korea(千田是也) who studied abroad in 1931. Harry Potamkin read it and “Prokino” became a big influence for his “Workers Film and Photo League”; in the same year they made films like “Prokino”. However, “Prokino” was being annihilated by the oppression of the Japanese police force, and relations between the two unions ceased in 1932. I will provide evidence for the relationship between the two Labor film unions by showing their movie criticism, correspondence and films. This is a good example of cinematic locality and continuity of expression.