

Program Note

The New Talkies

Benshi is a Japanese term meaning roughly "film teller." In Japan this profession thrived during the silent movie era. Although the form could be found in many countries in Asia, Europe and elsewhere, it reaches what might be its apex in that country, with these artists who were both actors and writers writing original scripts first for imported films, and later for a burgeoning movie industry. Just as today, a new movie would be delivered each week or so. Their job was to learn the film, crank out the texts and perform them as dramatic accompaniment to the flicks.

The traditional *benshi*'s relation to the movie could be complex, shifting between levels of narration, voice characterization and commentary. Sometimes a single film was narrated by a single person, occasionally first by one person followed by another, and a whole genre of films was even narrated by an ensemble of actors, all hidden behind a curtain. Many *benshi* were stars in Japan, even more than screen actors were. Indeed, the professional organization of *benshi* was strong enough to actually forestall the introduction of sound cinema technology into the production stream from studio to theater by several years.

In recent years, Midori Sawato has been preserving this tradition through her travels and performances in Japan and the West. Sawato is an accomplished performer who was taught in the 1970s by the last *benshi* of his generation, Shunsui Matsuda. At Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley during the fall of 2002, she narrated (in Japanese) several silent films and generously answered questions from the curious and admiring audience. This occasion inspired me to approach several San Francisco filmmakers and writers to try out a slightly altered version of this practice, using modern film clips with sound muted; this first so-called "neo-*benshi*" show took place on November 29th 2003 at Craig Baldwin's "Other Cinema" series in San Francisco.

The successes of that evening proved the concept could be adapted to a new sensibility. Since then many different writers, filmmakers and musicians have explored this latter-day art of live film narration at shows in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. In addition to Sawato's own tours with Japanese classics, we have been made aware of other kindred, transplanted practices and productions including Walter Lew's movie telling pieces going back to the 1990s, *El Automóvil Gris* (2003) by *Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes* (Mexico City), and Canadian Guy Maddin's recent *benshi*/foley/orchestral extravaganza *Brand Upon the Brain* (2006). Prerecorded cousins of this activity include Jay Ward's *Fractured Flickers* variety show in the mid-1960s, Woody Allen's *What's Up Tiger Lily* (1966), a silly romp through a Japanese gangster film, and situationist René Viénet's *Can Dialectics Break Bricks* (1973), a full-length *détournement* of a martial arts action film, and the well-known cable heckletainment show, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, and stemming from that a branding of the form as "Rifftrax," downloadable MST3K-like soundtrack accompaniment for sale to play while you watch a DVD. These latter devolutions of the once-live format turn the movies into a form of television, distributed by media conglomerates for solitary or small group consumption.

One concern is that the movies have been a little too jaded by this commodification and distribution model. One goal is to get the Theater back into the Cinema. That is, to experience the movies in a context that we interact with individually in the case of the authors, and collectively in the case of the audience, instead of merely watching rented DVDs on computers and blogging in solitude about them. The aim of this sort of live narration in the cinema is to bring people together for a collective experience of film which is both critical and generative, entertaining and performative.

- konrad steiner